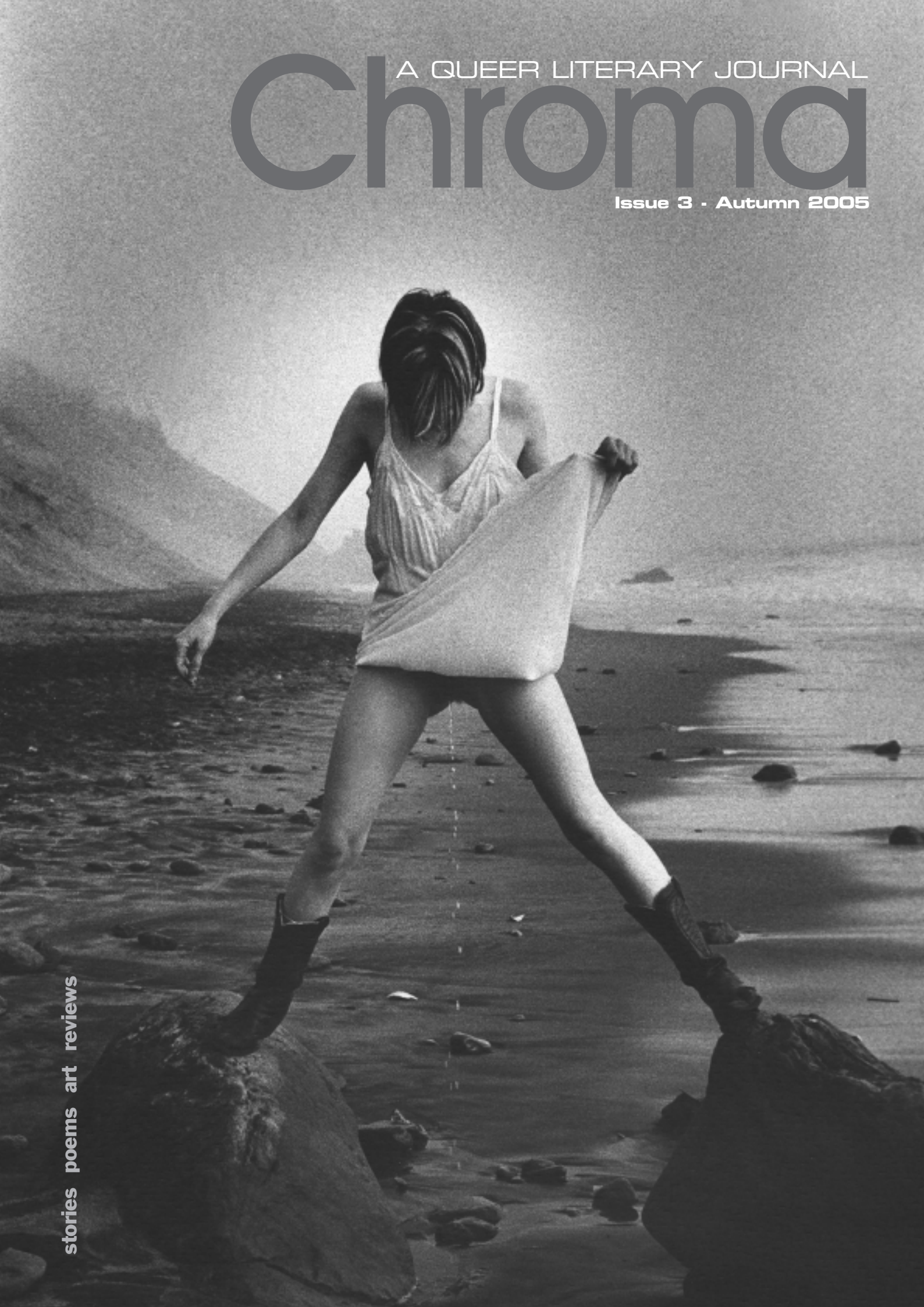


Chroma

A QUEER LITERARY JOURNAL

Issue 3 • Autumn 2005

stories poems art reviews



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03

Damascus Calling

Akkas Al-Ali

WE ARE sitting on the steps of a tiny mosque on top of Mount Qasiyoun. The day's last breath strokes the back of our necks and, not far away, a bird calls out and is greeted by the faint noise of traffic from the city below. A path meanders down from the summit past a shabby house outside which a pregnant woman sits drinking lemonade, resting her feet on a chair. For a moment, I imagine her having to walk all the way to the bottom of the mountain to fetch her shopping. I hope she has someone to do that for her.

The mosque is empty and clasps Qasiyoun's jagged edge like Tennyson's eagle eyeing the wrinkles of his empire far below. This is where Cain slew Abel, and inside the tiny grotto the quiet drip of water through porous earth convinces people the mountain itself laments that Man first learnt to shed blood on its surface. Like the Ka'bah in Mecca, considered to be the first house built solely for the worship of the one God, this mosque is a simple building – as simple as man's primordial yearning to know his Creator.

Half an hour ago, we hired one of those open-back vans near the Abu-Nour Mosque and drove up the bony streets that run like veins across this side of Qasiyoun. Huda and Diana sat in the front with the driver, a middle-aged man who stank of days-old sweat and cigarettes. Hamza and I, ever the second class citizens, were banished to the back, hanging onto the sides every time we turned a corner, desperately hoping we wouldn't fall out. Ramshackle houses lined the streets, connected by washing lines and electrical cables. Vendors with swollen pink faces were selling greasy rolls of shawarma on every street. Children carried folded up sheets of bread home for dinner. Old men walked in groups to the mosque, massaging pretty *misbaha* between their fingers, prayer beads that seemed to aid their gossip.

It was an impulsive decision to drive up here. Earlier this afternoon, Huda and I had been sitting in the kitchen of my apartment in Rokn el-Din, a leafy suburb of north-east Damascus. My kitchen window overlooks the city's white minarets on one side, and the mountain on the other. Across the road, in the middle of a field of grass, a man has a pigeon hut on his roof and every day he sets them loose on the neighbourhood. I don't know for what crime he is holding us to account, but in flocks of ten they circle the sky and foul our washing. There is something about these pigeons that leaves me mesmerised. They know the limits of their world – as far as their master's voice can resonate – and that is enough for them.

"I want to see the top of that mountain," Huda said, putting out her cigarette and taking a last sip

of wine. "I want to see how this city looks from up there."

Without thinking, I agreed.

Not too far from us, my flatmate Diana, a renegade American studying Arabic at the university, is sitting on the grass beneath a tree with her boyfriend, Hamza. Her parents would much rather she went back home and fixed herself up with someone more suitable, preferably an Irish-American Catholic. *His* parents believe all Western women are promiscuous and therefore not good enough for their well-bred son. Hamza rests his head in her lap. She has her lips next to his ear and between nibbles and kisses, whispers something – trinkets of love, perhaps – that makes him smile.

I am sitting behind Huda and cannot see her face for her autumn-coloured, Macy Gray hair. This is the quietest she has been all afternoon. She is eighteen and has lived here for the past ten years, another brown face in Masakin Barzeh, a district on the outskirts of Damascus that is home to a large Somali community. She is tall, has a flawless figure and the kind of beauty that would make any man's heart flutter – even mine. I have only known her a few months. Suki, a Japanese girl living in the Old City by the East Gate, introduced us at a party.

"Here's someone I *really* want you to meet," she'd said in an Arabic entirely her own. "You'll love her!"

This is the first time we have been anywhere without Huda's three best friends: Suki, Aysha, another Somali who I think has a crush on me, and Sameera, who is so beautiful that one of my friends lost his appetite after she rejected him. Whenever I see Huda, she is the centre of the group's attention; the most talkative, the one with the loudest voice, the biggest laugh, the wildest personality. Her repertoire of jokes ranges from the innocent to the bawdy. Now she is quiet.

It is partly my fault. Yesterday afternoon, Huda, Suki and I had attended the circumcision ceremony of Mazen, the little boy who lives with his family next door. The singing and dancing was fuelled by a great amount of food, then the guests made their offerings of toys and clothes and money. All afternoon I'd wanted to ask Huda about female circumcision, but stopped myself. It was past midnight when Suki left and Huda decided to stay over. We ended up talking about trivial things like the latest fashions in London. By lunchtime today, I couldn't contain myself any longer and ended up asking Huda whether she'd been circumcised or not. She looked at me for a second, silent, then stared out of the window, across the road, over the rooftops, at the mountain. Then she said, "I

want to see the top of that mountain. I want to see how this city looks from up there.”

For a moment, I'm lost; I don't know what to say. I wish Diana would call us to join them, but I know she won't. Silence, even after so many years of therapy, is still something that makes me uncomfortable. My need to fill it forces me to fabricate an interest in the most outlandish things, or to impose a half-hearted conversation on the unfortunate victim of my insecurity. I move one down from my place on the top step. I am now sitting next to her and thinking of something to say, but give up and sing under my breath. “Perhaps your absence,” I croak, trying to imitate Om Kalthoum. “Will make me forget your love.”

It is sunset and the city shimmers, speckled by the lighted windows of a thousand houses. The Shamiyyin, the generations-old inhabitants of Damascus, like to boast that their mountain is the final resting place of at least forty Biblical prophets, including Noah. With this ancient city spread out before me like a vast tapestry, its lights and colours covered in the quiet azure of sunset, it's not so difficult to understand why, in the old tales our grandmothers told us, God reveals himself on mountains, far removed from the chaos of urbanity.

“I was seven,” Huda says, her forehead still on her knees. “They came at night. I couldn't see their faces, but my mother was definitely one of them.”

I think of my own mother, the reason for all those years of therapy. If such a thing were practised in Asia, would *she* have done it to my sisters?

“They took me into the courtyard.” Her voice goes hoarse and she coughs. “They laid me down on a mat and someone – no, I think there were two people, two women – they held my legs apart.”

I love my mother, but I also hate her. Would *she* have carried my sisters out in the middle of the night, thinking only of her family's honour and nothing of what makes women human? And what about my father? Where would *he* have been while all this was going on?

I touch Huda's arm. It is a light touch, the tips of my fingers on her shoulder. Her back stiffens, she apologises – “It - I - Sorry” – and reaches for her cigarettes.

I remember *my* circumcision back home in London. I remember presents and money. I remember the party everyone else enjoyed while I was in the spare room under the doctor's blade and the stern unified gaze of a baying mob of male relatives. I remember being woken up the next morning by my mother's screaming. I remember feeling angry at being pulled out of a dream about a bridge and a field of wet grass and

wild rain and something else I can't recall.

The entire family – my father, sisters, cousins and aunts – were standing around my bed. They were pointing and staring at my penis, shaking their heads. One of my aunts said, “He must be in agony.” I remember touching myself and staring at red fingers and feeling confused. My stitches had come loose in the middle of the night and the bed was covered in blood. Perhaps there was pain, but I can't remember if I cried. My four-year-old brother was asleep in his bed on the other side of the room by the window. *His* stitches were fine.

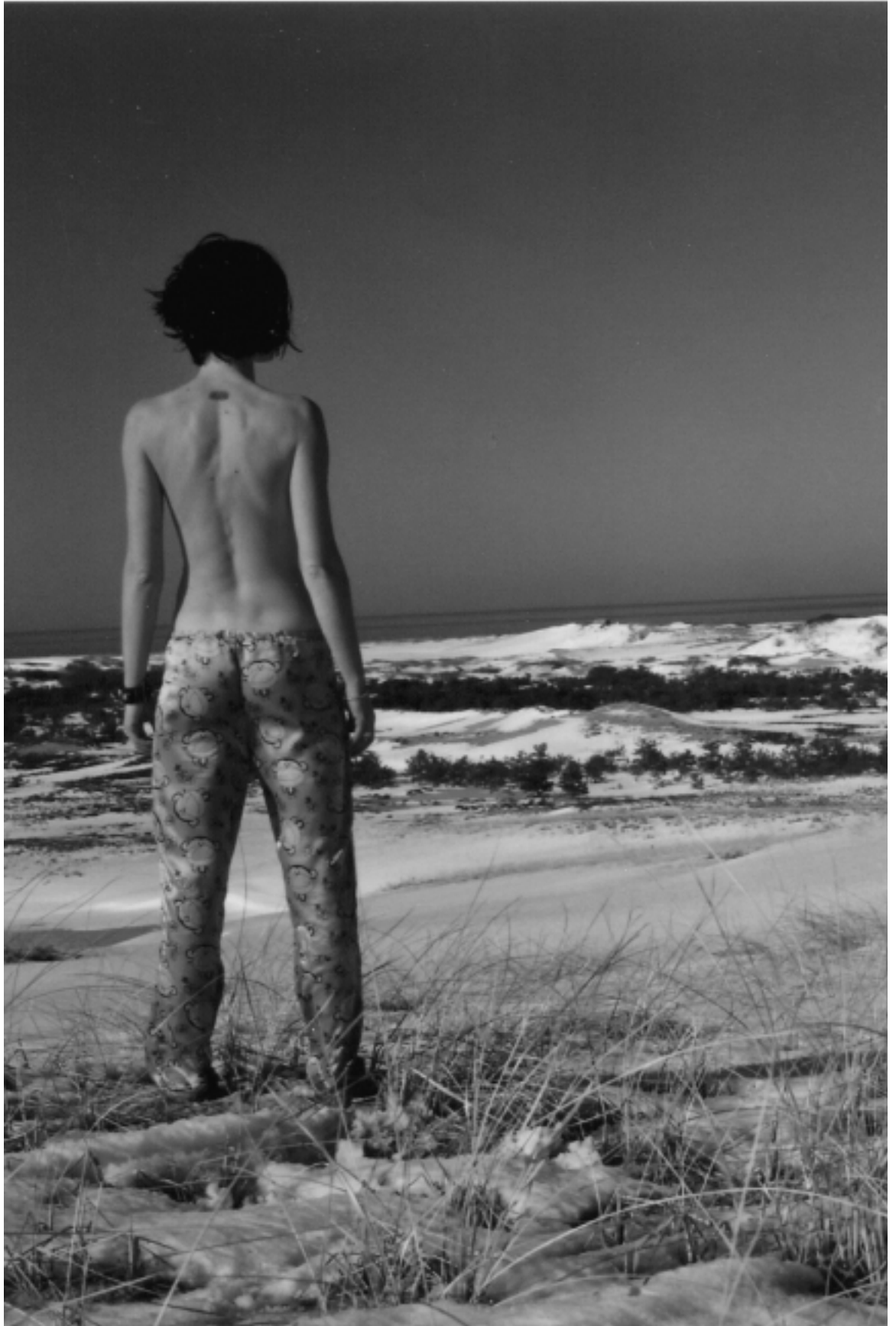
Later that morning Dr Ibrahim was summoned to our living room. He was a middle-aged Bengali man with greying side-burns and a slim moustache that made him look like Kishore Kumar. From my bedroom, where I was being comforted quite unnecessarily by one of my aunts, I could hear my father pacing up and down the tiny living room of our flat in Mile End. He was shouting at Dr Ibrahim, calling him a baboon. My mother was crying in the kitchen. Then I heard Mrs Said, our Egyptian neighbour from upstairs, say, “Back home, a barber would have done a better job.”

As I was being carried to the spare room to be laid out on the big double bed and re-stitched like an old sock, I overheard my older sister (she was eight at the time and jealous of all the attention I was getting) telling her friend, “He had a period this morning.” Being seven and gullible, I believed her. When my wounds healed and my father permitted me to go back to school, I told my form tutor all about my first period.

Huda says, “I remember the pain and something wet.” She says it in a matter-of-fact way. She says it's normal. She says she can't remember anything else.

I'm still quiet. I want to ask her if she hates her mother; a part of me wants us to have something else in common. I want to make her promise she won't do this to her daughters. I want to stroke her hair and kiss her forehead. I want to apologise on behalf of the men who invented this, but the words do not come. Hamza and Diana are kissing and he says something that makes her giggle. He says something else that makes her squeal and hide her face. Below us, streetlights flicker, and you can still hear the faint sounds from the streets. The pregnant lady has gone inside. If you look hard enough, you can see my apartment. The silence is broken by Huda crying. It's a tortuous sound, like the cries of a lost child. Hamza and Diana look up, confused. I tell them we should go home. ■

06





07



Ashley Jones
Winter Triptych

My Staying-In Story

Heena Patel



THEY SAY a mother always knows. Well, a sister knows better. It's true. When you're growing up, you don't go out hunting for records with your mum. You don't tell your mum in confidence about your friends' first drug-addled sex misadventures. And you don't tell your mum which celebrities you like or which people you fancy at school. At least my sister didn't. Like our CD collection, and our dolls, teddy bears and Lego before that, she shared those things with me.

So, when she came out to my mother while they were wrapping presents one Christmas Eve, I wasn't really shocked. My mother was. She was very upset. For the rest of the evening, she drifted through our house in a mournful trance. My father tried to find out what was wrong with the "old lady," but she didn't speak.

By the next morning, she could no longer contain her misery. From outside the living room, I heard a sob, and peeked through the crack in the door. I heard my father kiss my mother comfortingly. I had never witnessed a kiss between them before, or since.

"What are we going to do?" Mum wailed, once my sister and I had entered the room. "What are we going to tell your grandparents? How do you begin to explain something like this? There isn't a word in Gujarati for it."

Our father, though weary, felt it was his responsibility to be the voice of reason: "Could you not go to a doctor, Alpa? See a psychiatrist. Make an appointment."

"Dad, it's not like that. I can't get better, because I'm not ill. This is the way I feel."

"You need counselling," my mother sniffed, then burst into tears again.

"This is what happens when you're too clever. Over-educated, that's what you are," our father said, talking to both of us now.

That was his opinion. Education made you gay.

Nothing got resolved that day. Alpa was determined to find a Hindu gay guy and marry him for the sake of convenience. The only one she knew was a hideous little queen who lived in my halls at university in Manchester. At 18, he was younger than my sister by four years. A pathological liar ("I used to be a podium dancer at Heaven") and horny as hell. He was hated by all the new LGB recruits. The only thing in his favour was that he was from a Gujarati family. From Wembley, no less.

"Give me his number, Heena," my sister said. "I need to speak to him."

"You can't be serious. I mean, you've met him."

"Heena, who do you fancy who's famous?" Alpa asked me.

I thought for a moment. "No-one, really."

"There must be someone."

"I can't think. I liked Christian Slater for a bit. And I liked Johnny Depp in *Cry-Baby*."

I wondered if I should tell her that I had an even bigger crush on Amy Locane, the leading lady of the same film. I wondered if I should tell her how I'd spent the past two years irrationally in love with Vic, my best friend, and how only a few months back I would have died for this girl. I wondered if I should show her some empathy, some solidarity, support. But I feared she'd blab to our parents to make her look better. I envisaged the dreaded scene:

Mother, through tears: "Hai Bhagwan, not one gay daughter, but two. It must be something I did in my past life."

Father, weary: "This is what happens when you become all Westernised. When you don't obey your parents. So deal with the consequences. Phone your grandparents. Call them over here and tell them. Because I can't."

In the end, I said nothing. I was angry with Alpa. Why not just keep shtum? Bear the agony in silence, like I'd been doing for the past three years and for God knew how many more to come? Of course, it was easier for me; I was living away from home, studying. She wasn't.

Boxing Day. Alpa tries to find some middle ground and announces that she is bisexual. This does not go down well. My mother thinks they are even worse than gays. Bisexuals are greedy degenerates.

The drama seemed to have been forgotten, until 2 years later when my sister came out for another round of anguish, stress and tears; this time with added rebellion. At this point I was still in love with a girl. Not the same one as two years previously, thank goodness, but just as lovesick and rejected. I was angry with her for rocking the boat. She should have known better after last time. Again, I said nothing. And why should I? I hadn't done it with a girl. I hadn't done it with a boy either. I found the idea of bisexuality repellent. To me, it was just another way of my indecisiveness manifesting itself. I was determined to set my tent up in one camp or the other. So, I looked to all types of Manchester Gaylife for inspiration:

The gay women I knew hated men or feared them. They were heterophobic or biphobic. They clung to the categories of butch and femme for dear life. They said SM was abnormal. I knew

some perfectly lovely SM-dykes. They shopped at Habitat and Ikea, drank expensive lager, wore FCUK (clothes and fragrance) and liked clubbing. They ignored or ridiculed any lesbian who wasn't like them: Are you bigger than a size 12? Vegetarian? Hairy? Political? All of the above? Then fuck off. They despised hairiness on women, and ridiculed any lesbian who was. They were giggoers who still held a torch for riot grrrl. They shunned pop music and looked disgusted when I said I'd never heard anything by Bratmobile.

There was no joy to be found in Hetworld either: It was made up of girls once fun to be with who now spent their weekends shopping for kitchen tiles in B&Q with balding boyfriends, and women who hated men so much they spent the whole time talking about them. The women wore heels. They liked shopping and tried to keep up with fashion trends. They had skincare routines. The boys were, frankly, boring!

Asian Hetworld was worse. For people my age, religious and social functions were a beauty contest where intelligent conversation was banned. And the club scene? I loved the music, but couldn't stand the crowd. Okay, so I'd never given the boys a chance, but I didn't want to if their taste in girls was anything to go by: Long shiny jet-black hair ironed straight, in their uni-

form of denim and black with silver eyeshadow and black liquid eyeliner, dainty arms waxed and upper lips bleached. It felt like I was the only Asian girl to wear cords, trainers and T-shirts and dance like I didn't give a fuck.

I quickly got the feeling that I wasn't going to fit in anywhere. From then on I became decidedly anti-scene.

Then friends told me about Queer. Degeneracy plus politics minus body fascism? It sounded too good to be true. For the first time, I felt like I was amongst people who were like me, but only in the fact that they weren't like everyone else. And that wasn't questioned. I didn't feel entirely comfortable about it because I don't feel queer all the time. Sometimes I am rampantly mainstream and I enjoy it.

So it's not surprising that friends would often tell me: "I met so-and-so the other day and they said, 'That Heena, what is she?'" It amused me so much I decided not to come out; it would be like walking into a trap shaped like a cast iron mould. I'm going to stay in and let the world outside waste its time trying to figure out what I am.

So what am I? I am all of those things you think I am and none of those things. Get your head round that. In the meantime, I'm going to carry on dancing like I don't give a fuck. ■

09

Near Miss

Helen Sandler

You stop on the top wet step and nearly slip
and all day catch flashes of that header from the hedge
onto black tarmac – skull reshattered by the driver
shouting no – and what they'd say back home: how you
climbed a milestone thinking it was a stile, not used
to charting your way from maps alone, consulting
a New York City novelty uptown/downtown
compass to navigate the ancient lanes of Penwith
plus a booklet of walks to pagan sites with occult
tips. And how they'd find a scrap of newsprint in the
front pocket of your daypack about a man who
jumped from the Golden Gate Bridge a second time.

Beached

Rosemary Harris

(for Ben, in memoriam)

Coogee

The sign is formal, naked, elderly as the wizened walnut women
in their Speedos, who sit at the entrance, collecting 20 cents
admission in an old blue plastic icecream tub.

Coogee Ladies Swimming Club
Women and Children Under 8 Years Only
Saturday Morning Competition
9 – 11 am
All Welcome

No one calls it the Ladies',
it's the Women's Pool,

salty in friends' mouths. Hangout
for Enmore lesbians and Western suburbs Muslims,
who bring their small boys who stare at the bare breasts
their mothers – devout – won't.

The headland drops, a fort into the sea,
confronting the Pacific moat.
A line of topless sunbathers overlooks
from a thin battlement of grass
claimed by only the earliest risers,
vigilant in tanning.

Us late-in-the-days scatter
among the boulders at the foot,
that are chopped into tiny islands
when the tide is up and bucking.

Anarchic waves breach the safety chain,
churning would-be lanes with sea urchins,
with crabs, fished into a hurling stew.
Diligent swimmers with swelling shoulders
keep their heads down, stroke forward.

My skin licks the water. My armpits
salt.

Two round young women, inner-city pale,
shaved heads, wet white t-shirts
to ward off carcinomas, roll each other in the rough end.

Beachballs in love, the girl buoys
splash, delirious

at the absolute edge of the country
I want to keep leaving.

Seeing you bobbing lifeless,

a body in the waves.

Manly

Your news was thrown up at me
out of a conversation, the way your body
landed, finally, on the beach at Manly.
Without ceremony.

I missed your funeral. The people who knew
forgot I knew you. Context too far gone
to stay on the surface, to stay afloat.

But you were hometown.
You were Sydney in summer,
camp as a hot Christmas.

Sizzling the December afternoon,
sashaying into rehearsal
– a dazzling giggle of a man,
in women's lime green support-knickers
and sneakers. Girly brave.

Sliding from your pushbike,
you drummed Latin rhythms
on your bare chest, your shaved thighs.
Sweat danced off you. Even your breath
was percussive under my vocals,
my brother's bass. We – the band –
adored you. You thawed me.

Drawn early and always to risky heat,
the year we met you waited
in the back of your highschool teacher's car,
between the baby seat and his wife's dry cleaning.

Tuning your guitar on my front steps,
you whispered swiftly into the strings
of near misses with police;
but never what you kissed
for yourself behind cubicle doors,
your face pressed against tiles,
courting the hardcore.
It's what we're not meant to tell,
about men we love.

You made beauty from the bones out.
Your quest sparked your mouth and limbs.
You questioned everything.

Dragged up to slap minds open,
to slap open mouths shut.
Give them something to gawp at.
Gold hoop earrings and a day frock.
Denim cut-offs and a ponytail.
Feather boa and a sweet falsetto
trilling up King Street in the summer dusk.

Coming out at three a.m.,
you felt the air shuffle at your neck
and turned to duck the swing again,
the blow in the dark with a steering lock.

A man in a dress in the Sydney night,
holding the light to a touchpaper,
any day of the week.

But no one saw you shimmy from under the arm,
take the dive onto the ocean rocks,
this time. You simply went.

Your death is an oxymoron. Impossible
to put into a sentence that makes sense.

I just expect to see you at the bus stop.
Kissing me, kissing my brother,
on the lips. Leaving us
to wait for the nightbus,
in a duller darkness.

12



In Love with a Hungarian

JP Owen

HERE ARE some interesting facts about the Hungarian language. Fact number one: In Hungarian the pronoun for “he” and “she” is the same. My lover was an English teacher in Budapest before she moved to London; she speaks better English than most native English speakers I know. Nevertheless, every now and then, in the midst of a conversation, “he” will become “she” and then will be “he” again with an ease that some of us might wish possible in real life.

Fact number two: Hungarian has more letters than English and contains sounds not in the English phonology. I have been to physical and emotional heaven with this woman and yet my lover’s surname contains a letter I still fail to pronounce correctly.

My Hungarian-English dictionary, printed in Budapest, like most dictionaries, has phonetic notation next to each word or sentence. Fact number three: Hungarian doesn’t have the “th” sound. The dictionary’s advice to Hungarians trying to pronounce *the*, *there*, *that*, is to say *di*, *deer*, *det*, which in execution conveys street cred upon even the most well-educated of English-speaking Hungarians. Another letter that causes difficulty is w. So the phrase “wants to do something” would be spoken by a Hungarian as “vanc tu dú sâmszing.” The problem with w works in reverse; occasionally my lover will ask if I want a *wodka* and tonic. Much to her annoyance, I always make a lot of this, partly because I find it charming and partly because I am in denial about how erotic I find her accent.

Initially, I found her voice so compelling that I kept a perfectly anodyne voicemail message for the elicited pleasure of replaying and listening. A combination of voice, Hungarian directness, and high-heeled shoes made me break into a cold sweat whenever she walked into the room. Knowing that she also spoke Russian only added to the Cold-War romance that I built around her. In fact, her accent is very subtle and difficult to place, though she can do a good Hungarian accent on command, just as I can do a Scouse accent. When my father first met her, he said it sounded a bit like Cornish. Her accent does not sound Cornish, but it does go to show that native English speakers struggle with the diversity of dialects produced within the confines of the British Isles. A few more accents can’t hurt, and at least many foreigners have a better grip of English grammar than the natives; my Hungarian lover is very good for correcting my English.

I used to watch her sleeping and wonder: what language does she dream in? She said, being the sort of person who dreams mostly about people she knows, in her dreams she speaks Hungarian to

Hungarians and English to English people. The feelings she feels and the things she sees are, as in life, emotional and visual and without language. Nevertheless, when she sleeps, and through my imagination in her past life, I can’t help feeling that somehow there is another “her” that I don’t know. She admits that in Hungarian she is another person: the language affects the way she expresses herself, therefore the way people perceive her, therefore the way she acts. So, I try to learn her language to discover the twin, the double of the woman I love, who shares my house and my bed.

People who speak more than one language fluently are natural geniuses, effortlessly able to do white magic, unable to explain how they do it. I look on with a mixture of admiration and jealousy and struggle with my *Hungarian for Foreigners* books, giving myself comfort as I make so little progress that one commercial language school advertises its course by assuring potential students that Hungarian is one of the most difficult languages to learn. When I think of this, I feel like a linguistic commando, learning the language few dare to take on. I know it is a hopeless task.

In a smart Budapest café the waiter refused to understand my perfectly articulated “Kérek egy kávét és egy pogácsát” (I would like a coffee and a cheese scone) and insisted on communicating with me in English. In the bar at the Hungarian Folk Institute, the waiter was less snooty but nevertheless failed to suppress a smile as I ordered my Coca Cola in Hungarian. My lover explains that Hungarians are not used to hearing foreigners speak their language. My accent is “adorable” but unintelligible.

When my lover goes home now, she is accused by friends and family of having an English accent when she speaks Hungarian; she complains to me that her Hungarian is losing its fluency. It seems unfair that she should seem suspect in two places. However, I fear she will eventually lose her accent in English. Perhaps one day she will find herself in that smart café on Kossuth tér in Budapest having to order a cheese scone in English.

The woman I love has given me Hungary as a gift from herself. I keep it rather possessively in my mind as a romantic idea, a place of high culture, emotion and violence. Its history is littered with great musicians, intellectuals, political intrigue and trauma, border disputes and invasions: Liszt, Bartók, George Solti, Arthur Koestler and Imre Kertész. János Hunyadi beating back the Ottoman Empire, defeat at the Battle of Mohács, followed by a hundred and fifty years of occupa-

tion by the Turks, the war of independence against the Habsburgs, the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, which reduced Hungary by two thirds, occupation by the Nazis, then the Russians and the doomed 1956 uprising against the Soviets.

I wander about Budapest greedily looking for clues about my lover, and I see a city of two parts, running down from the hills into the plain, driven in two by a great river, punctuated by bridges, the most famous designed by an Englishman. The Hungarian Parliament reminds me of the Palace of Westminster with a St Paul's-like dome slapped into the middle. During the flight, on my first trip to Budapest, I was conscious of travelling a long way East. I was looking for more difference than I found. The Hungarians revel in their apocryphal descent from the Huns, to such an extent that Attila is still a popular boy's name. Marauding Asiatic tribesmen have a different kind of appeal in Hungary; but then, one person's murdering bastard is another person's Alexander the Great.

They may not actually be related to the Huns, but modern-day Hungarians call themselves Magyar. In the first millennium, the Magyar were a tribe of nomadic horsemen who came from East of the Ural Mountains and were so brutal they had Christians across Europe huddling in their churches chanting, "Oh Lord, save us from the arrows of the Hungarians." Hungarians have a fantastic folk tradition involving a white stag, and in another story, a giant mythical bird of prey called a Turul, a statue of which looms over the city, by the Royal Palace. The Hungarians also have their language, a vestige of their origins outside of Europe, unrelated to the languages of the people around them. For a country with so many borders, Hungary is in some ways more of an island than Britain, its literature and culture locked away, impenetrable to outsiders.

All of this heralded a more unfamiliar city than the one I found. When my lover and I were first together, I would search her face for traces of this exotic ancestry. Modern day Magyars are so interbred with their neighbours that their Asian past is indiscernible in their faces; they are too fair, too blue eyed, too tall and too Germanic. The face of the city similarly leans West rather than East with the grand architectural remnants of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and streets full of remarkable Hungarian Secessionist facades, their form of Art Nouveau.

At Christmas, we stayed in a flat in the centre, very close to the former Post Office Savings Bank. The flat was in a narrow street. Directly opposite there was a plaque, in Hungarian, commemorating

the deaths of a number of Jews in the building, during the Second World War. To get to the flat we had to go through a large, aged, but nevertheless, discrete wooden door, the sort through which people slip unnoticed. From here we passed into a hallway and then up a staircase that would make an ideal film set for a moody European film, grand but dilapidated, with the original cast-iron balustrade and light switches on timers. The block of flats had been built around a central courtyard. Our flat was on the third floor and we had to walk around a balcony at the top of the stairs. I had been taking photographs of details on buildings for five days before I pointed my lens at the walls of the building I was staying in. The stucco was pocked with bullet holes and shelling from the 1956 uprising against the Russians.

At the end of the Second World War, the Russians got to Budapest before the Allies and within a few years Hungary had become a communist state. By the time my lover and I were born, the political powers controlling our lives were aiming ballistic missiles at one another. I look at photographs of us growing up on either side of the Iron Curtain. We are both tall, long-limbed, skinny little girls, she with very long light brown hair, me with very long black hair, dressed in the same ankle-length floral flouncy party dresses, shorts and T-shirts, jeans and trainers. We had the same honest seven-year-old's direct gaze, the same self-conscious fourteen-year-old's pose. Me doing my best for God, the Queen and other people, but nevertheless looking uncomfortable in my embarrassing Brownie Guide uniform with the A-line skirt and yellow neckerchief with trefoil pin; she with a natural smile in her much cooler Pioneers red neckerchief doing healthy outdoor comradely things.

My lover and I were born in the same month, two years and six days apart. We make a lot of the proximity of our birthdays because we were born in June, and of course, our sign is Gemini, the twins. I was born near Liverpool, Longitude 3° :0 m:0 s W, she was born in Budapest, longitude 19° :5 m:0 s E; 1048 miles apart. Now we live near the Old Royal Observatory at Greenwich, Longitude 0°. We rejoice in similarities, we are surprised by differences.

It is a symptom of love that two people believe themselves impossibly united against armies of opposition, the odds, across time, the universe. How could it be that we met, given all the moments in history I could have been born, all the wrong turns down the wrong streets that might have led away from her? In fact, it was all about us making unlikely decisions. She had to

change her country, her career path, her sexual preference. I had to move to a place I always said I detested and get a job in an investment bank, an unlikely destination for a left-leaning lesbian who can't add up. The chance of never meeting is so great and the union of love is so powerful, so perfect and complete that it seems a greater power must have been at work. For the first fifteen years of our lives we wouldn't have been able to speak to one another. Even if we had climbed the Berlin Wall, we would only have been able to communicate by touch. Perhaps because I am a woman who loves women I connect with the romance and the pain of thwarted love. I see my younger self as the archetypal bride being prepared for an arranged marriage to a man she doesn't love, while her family and friends look on nodding and smiling. They do not recognise the rising panic of the bride, who is thinking: no, this is not my life; this is not me.

When I was growing up there was no other option but heterosexuality. It was inevitable and obvious and I couldn't understand the resistance in myself. To discover privately, in dangerous secret, that love is not an arid desert but a sumptuous garden, was all at once to feel relieved of an enormous burden, to have the light suddenly turned on, to have life open up before me. Suddenly the world had many more dimensions than before, because I couldn't help wondering what other unquestionable truths they were lying to me about.

Nationalism or ethnicity is one of them. I am unusually dark for an English woman. In the hope of finding some romance in my ancestry, I traced my family back to the eighteenth century only to find myself the most English English person I know. At least, officially. The late seventeen hundreds seemed a long way to have traced back an amateur family tree. My parents were impressed when I told them. But it is nothing. Four generations. My cat's pedigree goes further back than that.

Considering many of us are so jingoistic, it is incredible how little we know about our near history. We stand on the shores of Dover shaking our fists at the tide of invading foreigners, happily oblivious to the artfully forgotten Romany Gypsy grandfather or the entirely eradicated great-grandmother from St Lucia. The god of nationality requires us to be forgetful. In 1701 Daniel Defoe wrote a poem called "The True Bred Englishman" deriding the idea that there was such a thing based on simple text-book English history: the Romans invaded, then the Saxons, then the Vikings, then the Normans, we are the sum of

these parts, therefore mongrels. But science now tells us, it's even worse than this, our pre-Roman ancestors did not sit in glorious isolation. Trade had been taking place between Britain and Europe for thousands of years before the Romans arrived. Our ancient ancestors' spears were made of foreign metal. Foreigners have been coming, going, staying, marrying and dying in Britain for thousands of years. No wonder the people from the BNP are so hot under the collar. There are so many foreigners here.

For my lover and me, nationality is a game we play with one another; teasing each other about our accents, our supposed national tendencies and manners, our history and customs. She calls me "you Angol," I call her "my Magyar." We speak mainly English with a growing scattering of Hungarian words. As time goes on, we won't be able to communicate with the outside world. We compare our passports, hers navy blue, mine burgundy, and national anthems, mine celebrating ruling things, hers bemoaning ceaseless misfortune. The biggest issue for us seems the lack of shared early cultural memories. With my French friends, I can talk about the Magic Roundabout, even if the words were all different. My lover and I run through our childhoods again for one another: I make her sit through episodes of *Bagpuss* and she makes me watch the disturbing and anarchistic Hungarian children's TV programme, *Dr Bubo*.

One day she was playing a Hungarian CD, something that evoked the kind of memories you can't explain, but can only share with someone who was there, and it made her cry because I, her lover, her chosen life-partner, could not understand and share them with her. It is not for her Hungarianness that I love her; it is not because of my Englishness that we argue. We make love mostly without words, we love each other with our eyes and our fingers, and wherever our skin touches. We argue about the size of that space where our individual selves can exist outside of us, like every other pair of lovers.

For the most part our different nationalities are amusing and incidental; they are creative avenues to love; they are decorations and accessories, the fancy underwear of the mind. As a negative, it seems a small impertinent difference between us. But then Hungary is now a member of the EU and she has Indefinite Leave to Remain. Something in the back of my mind nags at this complacency. ■

Mixed Race

Selina Rodrigues

I want to look good
on nights out on the Med.
Chained restaurants,
verandas like sails
yacht people, sand flesh.
I slip into a halter-neck top
my mum looks and says –
your skin – the colour of putty.

My skin – the colour of coca cola,
my friends and the faded street,
we drift, a haze of bodies,
bikes and washing
entangled on balconies.
Kids in day-glo like parrots
one swoops and shrieks –
you back then, Paki?

16

The See-Through Tongue

Richard Goodson

Queueing at this African check-in desk
this moony-moany britishfucker's mono-fucking-
lingual!
Gatwick-bound?
We do hope your ticket's
single.

Because, my friend, although we legions
of profligate babblers and heathen bunglers
can retreat to our jungles
of diphthongs, plosives and fricatives,
we can also, follow your every god-damned word perfectly.
pale-arse,

Which makes you fragile,
see-through.
Like these glass babies.

*White-hot from the womb
the midwives wipe them
like vases.*

Before You Go

Ruth O'Callaghan

say why you closed our joint account
without a word, your fingers splaying
each soiled note, meticulously tallied,
onto the mahogany table straining
beneath the weight of coiled desert roses

(carved by Saharan winds from compacted sand
and gathered by Sabrian tribesmen
to lie in souks with filigree birdcages
and curl-toed slippers).

In their petals I see a mirage: sand-
swaying shadows, the feel of camel
whose ragged skin absorbs our sweat
from thighs clenched tight as memory.

Northern Line Train to America

Helen Sandler

17

We stash baggage
in a wooden locker,
form an orderly line.

Lest my father wander
I pinch a tag on his anorak
and fix it to the sleeve of mine.

Eight hours to go
and then one minute
to get us all on board that train.

As the underground
expert, the eldest child,
I am this operation's brain.

18



Kobi Israel
Untitled



kobisrael.com

19

Kobi Israel
Untitled

Leyton Orient Sutra

Adam Bala

20

IT WAS snowing in his back garden in May. The willow tree, an upright non-weeping variety that dominated his long narrow garden was releasing thousands of white fluffy airborne seeds from its fat hairy catkins. The tree had become one enormous dandelion clock. The seeds floated in the sunshine; some, buffeted gently by the breeze, clung together in fluffy formations, like the lamb-swool you find caught on barbed wire fences in the countryside.

His neighbour said they brought her out in a nasty rash. She'd had to dose herself up with antihistamines and was scared to go outside until given the all-clear. There was no escaping them. She couldn't sleep with the windows open. He imagined her barricaded indoors, boarding up the windows to resist the aerial onslaught.

The grass under the tree was white and downy soft with them. They stuck to any sticky or wet surface: aphid coated rosebuds, the vivid lime green sap-speckled flowers of euphorbias, spiderwebs, the vigorously spiraling new-season stems of clematis, insides of teacups, and the melting chocolate surfaces of the Marks and Spencer's Viennese shortbread biscuits he'd laid out at teatime for his visiting family.

Eventually, his mother, sister, brother-in-law and their ten year old son had had enough, and with exaggerated coughing, brushing and blowing away of seeds they decided to call it a day, folded up the deck chairs they'd brought with them and beat a hasty retreat indoors. They 'd been defiantly determined to make the most of that rare occurrence – a sunny Bank Holiday Sunday.

His nephew was bored. He'd finished constructing Makuta, his latest Bionycle, and the battery on his Gameboy had run flat. His nephew's father was looking bored, too, and had begun repeatedly whistling the opening phrase of the theme tune to *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, something his brother-in-law did, he suspected, when he wanted to be somewhere else. They made excuses about unspecified jobs to do at home and beating the traffic, and left. He suspected his mother would like to have stayed longer.

When they'd gone, he washed up the antique willow-pattern tea service, put away the family-size teapot and piled their gifts neatly on his desk. He'd enjoyed seeing them, even though the meal had been disappointing; the pork dry and overcooked, roast potatoes not crisped, the cider, creme fraiche and apple sauce too sour. A plain apple sauce might have gone down better, and he wished he'd found time to make meringues to go with the

fruit compote. His nephew had only managed a few forkfuls of his meal despite assisted cutting-up and large dollops of concessionary ketchup. In the end, he made do with a banana, which was fortunately just the right side of firm. He remembered his own childhood mealtime resistance, the fights, the tantrums. Vegetables? Stuff that's supposed to be good for you but tastes horrible? Sprouts, cabbage, greens? *No pasaran!* Then he felt guilty thinking of all the Sundays his mother had laboured lovingly in a kitchen half as big as his, cooking a full roast, and finding time to make cakes, scones, jellies and blancmanges for afternoon tea.

For a while he was back there.

"A Walk In The Black Forest" was playing on *Two Way Family Favourites*, again, requested by some loved-one serving in the armed forces on the edge of the Iron Curtain or some distant, soon-to-be-independent colony. There was a comforting predictability to Sundays then. Roast beef one week would be followed by roast pork the next, then roast lamb the next, and so on throughout the year, with an intermission for chicken or turkey on Bank Holidays. Dinner always came with gravy, and afters always came with custard. There were hard times in the Seventies when meals had to be bulked out with larger helpings of potatoes, but the twin rivers of Gravy and Custard never ran dry.

He saw his mum wiping her hands on her pinny, saw her opening the steamed-up kitchen window to call Dad in from the allotment to carve the joint. He prided himself on his carving skills. He kept the knife sharp and carved thinly, which meant there'd be enough meat left over to mince into a shepherd's pie, or to eat cold with mashed potato and Branston Pickle the following day. He made the first incision as the clock was striking one, as Billy Cotton shouted his trademark opening catchphrase of "Wakey Wakey" on the radio. Strange, he thought, how people who reminisce about the Sixties never mention *Two Way Family Favourites* or *Billy Cotton's Band Show*. Then again, the Sixties always seemed to be happening elsewhere, somewhere in a cloud of patchouli and pot at the end of a long ride on the 36 bus, in Hyde Park, Carnaby Street or Grosvenor Square, not their little estate in Sydenham SE26.

The sun had gone in. The sky was turning grey. Fewer seeds fell now. He loved this time of day. A blackbird sang from the top of a leylandii conifer until a magpie knocked it from its perch. He looked for another magpie. There was none.

The lilac tree looked best in this light, he thought; it never looked as good against a clear

blue sky. He loved May, it made him think that renewal might be possible after all, that he, like nature, might return in leaf-turning freshness after the dark winter. He breathed in the heady scent of the blossom.

Back indoors, he idled some time away in his office flicking through the latest issue of *Boyz*. He lingered for a while over the escort pages, then read his stars. They gave him a zero passion rating and chided him for being an uptight, fussy Virgoan queen. He tossed the magazine to the floor in mock disgust.

Never mind Boyz, he thought. Where were the Angelz?

The outlook was, as Ella says, decidedly, well...

As he grew older, he realised this was how existential crises came on, not in great... dramatic... keeping-you-awake-at-night episodes of doubt and worry, but irritating moments of indecision as day gives way to night and you grapple with the dilemma: to stay in or go out?

Of course, he could stay in, listen to music, watch TV, phone a friend, meditate. Those were the sensible options. He thought about the White Swan. At least he was more likely to talk to someone there, but Limehouse was a bummer to get to. Fuck it, he knew what he'd do, he'd celebrate Mayday his way.

The drivers from Orient Cars were reliable and friendly. The mini-cab driver, a middle-aged Indian man in a red and white Leyton Orient football shirt was listening to Sunrise Radio. Sensing the friendly interest of his passenger - he'd asked: Is that Sunrise Radio? - he began singing along in Hindi to a mournful song. Then, for the benefit of his passenger, he sang in English: "I was working so hard to improve my life, I never realised death was so near."

Making eye contact, he repeated the refrain, speaking slowly this time.

"I was working so hard to improve my life, I never realised death was so near."

The driver dropped him off near the Green Man roundabout. Cars snaked back from the 24-hour Tesco. He crossed over the road, past honking Canada geese splash-landing on the Hollow Pond boating lake, across the treeless scrubby grassland of Leyton Flats towards the forest. He insisted on calling it a forest, but it was barely a wood. It had once been part of a much larger forest, the magnificent Waltham Forest where kings had hunted wild boar and deer, and Queen Boadicea and her daughters had committed suicide by eating poisonous berries. Now the remnants of this great primeval forest was managed

by men in suits at the Corporation of London, and its beech trees threatened by global warming; their shallow roots unable to suck up enough water and nourishment from the dried earth.

The warm weather had drawn the crowds to the Flats. Crossing the open space, he passed a pack of crows scavenging for food; pedigree dog-walkers; groups of barefooted South Africans huddled around prohibited barbecues; Somali men chewing *khat*; muscular Polish men in tight white jeans and T-shirts flirting with women in pink jeans and rhinestone cowboy boots.

The grassland gave way to thicker, wilder, greener vegetation. It was getting dark as he reached the perimeter of the wood.

He waded into the waist-high cow parsley and pushed through an opening in the holly bushes. He felt exhilarated and relieved to enter the woodland's dark embrace. He worried that he might be alone, but as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he began to make out the shadowy figures of men among the trees. Some men hurried about purposefully, others stood still, alone or in groups of two or three. Some talked, most were silent. He couldn't decide who were more confident, the men who stood and waited or the men who ran about.

Intoxicating smells floated and dissolved on the still night air, the pungent scent of May blossom, the smell of aftershave, a hand-rolled cigarette, the lingering smell of poppers. He heard the sound of twigs breaking underfoot, noticing how some men's footsteps were heavier than others.

He tore open a sachet of Kamagra and squeezed the orange gel into his mouth. At forty-six, he valued the extra confidence it gave him. It was one thing less to worry about. The metallic foil put his teeth on edge. He licked his sticky fingers clean. He was ready.

The last time he'd visited the forest it was bathed in the light of a full moon, and owls on both sides of the forest were too-wit-too-woooing a lyrical, mysterious conversation back and forth high above the heads of the men cruising below. He imagined the birds casting a spell on the men who went home irrevocably altered, behaving in increasingly strange ways much to the consternation of partners, friends and family. That night, he'd had a strange encounter with a big Asian guy who had surprised him first by asking to be fucked, and again when he turned around after fucking and said: "Do you believe in miracles?"

And he'd responded without hesitation: "Yes. I believe in miracles."

"In that case," the man said, looking pleased.

“Place your hand on any part of my body and make a wish, but nothing silly.”

He placed his hand on the man’s chest, over his heart, and wished they might both be happy and cured of whatever was ailing them.

There were no owls tonight.

In a clearing by the decaying trunk of a collapsed tree, he found him: over six foot, early thirties, good looking, bearded, smiling. He wore green combat trousers and a green T-shirt.

They exchanged glances and grabbed evaluatively at each others crotches.

“Do you fuck?”

“Yes, I do.”

He spoke in a deep, surprisingly fruity middle class voice which he found strangely reassuring. He tugged the man’s cock free from his Calvin Klein pants, and, holding it like a handle, led him away from the open space into a labyrinth of dense, dark gorse. As they passed further down the path, there was an increasing amount of litter underfoot, sexual litter – tissues, condoms, condom packaging, a can of Red Bull – that seemed to fluoresce in the moonlight.

He dropped his trousers and pants, nearly lost his balance, and reached into the top pocket of his denim jacket for condoms and lube. He tore the condom from its foil with his teeth. The man got his cock out. He sucked it briefly. It was big, fleshy, uncircumcised and tasted of latex. He tried to roll the condom on, it bounced back, the man took over, and pulled it on expertly with one confident jerk of his fist. He bit into a sachet of Wet Stuff, cursed the toughness of the plastic. What were you supposed to do, carry a pair of scissors? He squirted some on the guy’s cock, shoved the rest up his arse, wiped the lube from his fingers onto the front of his T-shirt, and bent over. Bowed and prostrated, shame and pride danced inside him like small flames feeding on his alternating self-disgust and self-satisfaction.

Should he have got the man to lube him up? Was there an etiquette? At least this way it felt more like a shared responsibility.

The man pressed hard, but off target. For a few alarming seconds, he wondered if he was abnormal, perhaps his arsehole was in the wrong place! He seemed so sure of the way in, so persistent. He helped him adjust his aim and guided him inside. He gasped. It hurt like hell. He breathed deeply. All things must pass, he thought, including this pain.

His attention switched to the surrounding trees standing in silent witness. They’d be there years

after he’d died. He imagined being held in the arms of an ancient oak, its branches drawing his body tightly up against its rough solid trunk, and with a loud crack, the trunk splitting violently from its crown to its base, opening up a deep gash. He imagined the tree pulling him in, folding his flesh and bones into its centre, its core, then closing up again, leaving no trace of scar or his existence. Gone.

He glanced upwards at the watery moon.

He didn’t want to be fucked by man, he wanted to be fucked by God. He wanted to go beyond, go completely beyond, go completely beyond beyond. He wanted to awaken. He knew this was not the way to do it.

“Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.”

“Wakey, Wakey!”

The stranger pushed harder. He was in. Deep. It didn’t take long. A couple of minutes.

Even as it was happening he couldn’t help thinking that the idea and the symbolism were somehow more pleasurable than the physical sensation. He felt body and mind split, and the gravitational pull of mundane reality.

What on earth was he doing? He should know better at his age. Supposing the guy was a... Supposing the condom split. Supposing, supposing, supposing. He wondered if the guy was enjoying himself. Should he enquire? Should he speak, or remain silent?

No, he wanted to be pleased. He was tired of pleasing others. Still, it all seemed rather peremptory, a pit-stop-service kind of fuck, rather than anything remotely passionate or special. What did he expect?

The man’s pelvic thrusts quickened. He stabbed into him more impatiently, trying, he thought, to pump more excitement into the situation than was actually there, or perhaps he was trying to hurry him on towards climax so he could move onto his next conquest.

Enough!

He let out a groan to let the other guy know he was coming in case he missed it. His cum fell to the ground in a few heavy drops. It was sad spunk, not the happy spunk that comes out in heroic arcing spurts, but the unenthusiastic exhausted kind that only just makes it to the end of the urethra.

The man pulled out, flung the condom into the bushes where it snagged, and dangled redundantly, stupidly like a Dali watch. He produced a pack of Kleenex from his jacket. He wasn’t sure if it was any consolation, but at least he was generous with his tissues and they were good quality,

three-ply and soft. They hugged politely and went their separate ways in different directions back out through the maze. It began to rain.

As he left the wood the rain became a fine drizzle. There was a chill in the air. The Flats were deserted as he headed back towards the busy main road. On the blurry wet horizon, he could see the floodlit Alfred Hitchcock Hotel shining like a ship at sea. He imagined it noisy and full of smoke, a large crowd, big white plates in hand, pressing impatiently around the tables in the Carvery. He could feel lubricant seeping into his pants, and hear the siren wail of police cars or ambulances tearing along Whipps Cross Road, probably on their way to A&E.

It was a long walk back. As he got nearer home, there were fewer trees, and as the wide avenues of red-brick detached villas gave way to narrow streets of terraced housing, the gardens grew smaller. The landscape became more unforgivingly urban; the distinction between private and public space less defined. Hedges and anything green had been grubbed out to make way for car parking or the latest fashionable aggregate.

In Albion Road he stopped to admire a fox sitting in the middle of a concreted-over garden. It sat by a large tub of arum lilies. In the centre of the white flowers stood a solitary shiny moulded plastic figurine of Botticelli's Venus.

He spoke softly.

He said: "Hello foxy."

He said: "Where have you been?"

He said: "Where are you going?"

The fox didn't move; it just stared back. It was small, not much bigger than a large cat. It looked unnourished, diseased, its fur bald in places, its white-tipped brush thin and spindly. He thought of opening the lid of a wheelie bin standing close by; it was bound to have some food scraps in it. Why not? He could slam open every wheelie bin he passed on his way down the street, feed every hungry urban fox in the neighbourhood.

He realised he was being watched suspiciously from behind net curtains by a woman silhouetted in the blue light of a TV, or was it a sunbed? He imagined her turning in alarm to her husband, him grudgingly getting up from his armchair to investigate, coming confrontationally to the front door, by which time the fox would have vanished, leaving him with no alibi, no reason to stand and stare, a conspicuous threat to neighbourhood security.

He walked on, then turned his head, wondering if the animal might follow him as stray cats often did. The fox was in the middle of the deserted road, but still looking his way. He walked on several yards. In the gutter he spotted a discarded box of Tender 'n' Tasty Tennessee fried chicken. He shook the soggy box and threw it high in the air towards the fox. The box and its contents - chicken bones with very little meat on them - spread out on the glistening black tarmac. ■

23

Falter

S Dass

Your kiss is like acid
on the days when
they have
beaten you
out there.
Since
they do not see you
as i do,
my love,
your touch is like nettle.

God

Jake Arnott

Illustration by Paul Gardiner

"Are you surprised?" He asked when we first met. "Well," I replied, trying to hide any note of disappointment in my voice. "I was expecting someone older."

God turned out to be unbearably young and a right little raver. Forever rushing around, wanting to go out and visit His Divine Grace at someplace or other. Putting in an appearance, that's the important thing, He's always frantically worried that He might not be A-list any more. Never staying long in one place. "Light up a room and then leave," He'll always say.

I was kind of hoping that by now He might have calmed down a little with age. But eternity doesn't allow you to grow up, it's always going to make you feel young in comparison. And, to be frank, there are times when He behaves like a petulant child-star, painfully aware that all His best work is already behind him.

He'll come home at all hours, crashing around the place, waking up the neighbours, only to rush off somewhere else. He lives week to week with that tiresome work-hard-play-hard ethic. He never seems to have any long-term plans.

And on the seventh day, it's come-down time. He'll be completely burned out by Sunday, like a speed-freak with amphetamine withdrawal. It's supposed to be the day of rest but He crashes out really badly. He'll sit in a darkened room, brooding, or mooch over his cuttings book, complaining that He just isn't getting the notices any more. The sabbath is meant to be a time of worship, but it only makes Him realise that His fanbase is dwindling and that someone or something is always threatening to become bigger than He is.



And in the reclusive state, He'll often throw a tantrum. He can get pretty nasty sometimes and boy do we get to suffer for it, but He's under a lot of pressure. It's not easy being a bit of a has-been. Early fame spoiled him and He's been left to preside over the long slow decline of his career. But by Monday He's up again, ready to do the celebrity circuit once more. I mean, what else is He going to do? Let's face it, He's never going to make it in the real world.

Toast

Bec Chalkley



MY MUM was six months old when she was left on the doorstep of Perth Infirmary with tuberculosis of the spine. The story of her early life is one of half-truth and legend, the gossamer curtain of reality flickering this way and then that. Some of her story appears fantastical – the facts don't fit and the conclusion is far from elementary. Maybe it is in part the product of a childhood spent in institutions, with only a salutatory glimpse at the truth to hang her perceptions on.

I would hazard there are several reasons why grown-ups don't tell children the truth: to protect them, to control them, or because they lack the ability or courage to tell it like it is. In my family, there was a fourth reason – for fun. Our childlike innocence was a source of hilarity, particularly for my father, many of whose tales were not revealed as tall stories until long into my adulthood. Perhaps, in her early years, my Mum fell prey to all of these ruses, and sometimes perhaps she willingly fooled herself.

I don't want to know about my birth family. They left me there, that's all I need to know.

This strange baby was, briefly, a national sensation. Scottish newspapers urged her parents to come forward, but today's news is tomorrow's chip wrapper. If her parents had spotted their baby's image staring up at them through a steaming poke of chips, they were never driven to act. My Mum grew up in hospitals, and the nurses became her shifting, uniformed family who fed and taught and washed her.

They call me Miriam, the nurses, after the story in The Bible about the baby found in the rushes. My real name is Elizabeth. They say I am from gypsy stock. They say if I don't behave the gypsies will come and get me.

She was transferred from Perth Infirmary, as a toddler, to the Princess Margaret Rose Hospital for Crippled Children. It was Edinburgh's foremost charity, with several wards for children with tuberculosis who were treated in accord with contemporary post-war practice.

The ward is very cold. They say we need lots of fresh air, so one end of the ward is open to the elements. They put screens up to stop the snow coming in, but sometimes a flurry of powdery white snowflakes will drift in and settle on our protective bed covers. Sometimes I wake up and think I

am in Heaven. We are wrapped in blankets and woollen clothes. They bring us hot water bottles and scalding drinks.

I learn quickly. I can read a newspaper at three. I don't like dumplings. They make me eat dumplings.

I have to lie flat all the time, so the nurses have fixed me a mirror above my bed which I can angle to see whoever comes into the room. I am part oracle, part town crier. "Sadie! It's yer granny!" I cry, and "Morag! It's yer aunty!" All sorts visit us here, wealthy and famous patrons and idols. "Duck!" I cry as a movie star homes in on my unsuspecting neighbour. "They're going to kiss you!" Forewarned, he gratefully feints to the side before they plant their benevolent smacker. One day I wake up and Coco the Clown is looking down at me. With his painted smile and fan of red hair he looks like a big sad flower. The brass band let us try out their instruments. I blow into the trumpet and it makes a sound like a crabby elephant.

Every day the children deemed most needy of fresh air, which always includes me, are wheeled outside to lie on the veranda in their beds. There is a huge swathe of dark green canvas that flaps noisily in the wind. I throw my ball high up in the air and catch it. "Go on Miriam!" the other children shout. "Throw it higher!" I throw it higher and higher, until one day I throw the ball with all my might and a pair of child's hands come out of the clouds and catch it. The hands disappear, and the ball never comes back to earth. All the children see it.

There is a fire in the hospital, in another ward. We are far enough away to stay safely where we are, but we hear a huge crash, and see the sky turn red. I have a recurring nightmare that the nurses come and take me to another room. There is a girl lying there next to me and she has horrible, lumpy skin. They roll my skin off and give it to her, and they roll her bumpy skin onto me.

The ward had about twenty-five beds. The beds were arranged in strict rows according to the child's age. One day a much younger girl with polio had her bed wheeled next to my Mum's. She was called Vivien. When Vivien's mother came to see her, the Ward Sister explained that an unknown force had driven her to behave in this irregular fashion. Vivien's family were Spiritualists, so they shrugged this off as normal. They believed in an after-life in which people did not die but 'passed' to a Spirit realm, from which they could comfort and guide the living. They believed that those with the gift could channel Spirit, and heal the sick.

Aunt Edith comes with Vivien's parents. She isn't really Vivien's aunt. When she puts her hands on me I see blue sparks come off her fingertips. The doctors say I've had a miraculous recovery, that the bones have simply knitted together. Nature has a way, they say, and they declare I'm fit to leave, and isn't modern medicine a wonderful thing.

When Vivien's parents take her home, they take me, too. I go to live in a big sandstone house in Newport-on-Tay with Vivien's little sister Pamela and all the aunts and grannies. I watch as one granny pours steaming porridge into a drawer lined with greaseproof paper and when it has hardened, slice it up for biscuits.

I am twelve. I have never felt rain. When the heavens open I stand in the garden with my arms aloft and mouth open wide until I am told to come in. I never knew that toast came from bread. I thought toast just came that way, crunchy and browned. I stand at the toaster, toasting slice after slice of bread. I like my toast burnt, without too much butter.

I have not seen cars, not crossed roads, never been to an Italian chip shop for a poke of chips. One morning I run for the school bus, not knowing I still have my pyjama trousers on. I'm not used to all this. Me and Vivien take baby Pamela for a walk. We let go of the pram by the cliff and that is nearly the end of Pamela. I get dangled over the stairs by my ankles as punishment. I push Vivien's wheelchair around school. The other children demand a penny for their help, so I do it. The lady who does our laundry has a glass eye. When she leaves the room, she takes out her eye and puts it on the table, telling us "I'm watching you!". We sit fixed to our bench, staring at the glass orb.

I am eighteen and I am going to see the world. I am leaving Scotland behind.

Mum worked as a nanny in Texas with a Senator's children. They say the Senator had a reputation for great probity at the time, though he was later involved in several lurid scandals.

One afternoon Mum discovered a tarantula in the nursery, and the children backed into a corner. She saw no recourse but to stab it with a sharp stick. I don't think she ever liked spiders. Later she worked for a Viennese Princess with whom she repeatedly argued about the true ingredients of Welsh Rarebit. My Mum would rarely admit when she was wrong.

"Make the children Welsh Rarebit!" shouts Princess Windischgraetz.

"I have!" I reply at equal volume.

"No, no, there are other things!" she demands.

"It's just cheese on toast!" I tell her again, but she won't have it.

"I want Welsh Rarebit!"

I imagine my Mum like Maria in *The Sound of Music*, an orphan who becomes a nanny for a wealthy Viennese family. Mum had the same capacity for getting into trouble, fostered by a ready appetite for mischief as well as an uncontrollable urge to blurt out the truth. And she liked to sing. Later she worked for the US Airbase in Madrid, embraced a lifestyle of late meals and carousing, early starts and afternoon siestas.

I arrive at my apartment building after my first night out. The front gate is locked and I can't get in. I rattle the gate but no-one comes. I start to cry. I am in a strange city and I can't get into my new home. Some locals come along and produce a whistle from nowhere, give a couple of shrill blasts, and a small man runs out with a bunch of keys. He unlocks the gate and we go up the stairs to my apartment so that he can let me in. Suddenly the lights go out. He has bad intentions, this small man in this strange city. I scream and scream, my cries echoing up and down the stairwell. He is shouting agitatedly in Spanish, and by the way I can hear his keys jangling, I know he is waving his arms around animatedly. My new neighbours hurry to their doors. I hear someone punch the wall and the lights come back on. Someone explains in patient English that the lights are on a time switch. "Sí, sí!" cries the man, wearily.

From Mum's stories of Madrid's quirky traditions, the city began to hold a special magic for me, so I took myself off to Madrid and stayed on Calle Espoz y Mina, near Puerta del Sol, with a man named for a Spanish king. He had impeccable English and a demure Afghan hound who cruised the *barrio* with him. At night they would glide past us in Espoz y Mina like ghosts, showing no glimmer of recognition, as if we only existed within the confines of the hostel. In the city most people are strangers, and I loved the bustle of Madrid, its anonymity. I tentatively explored *bar tapas*, washing *queso* and *bouquerones* down with *cuba libre*, or got jittery from too many *café solos*, returning late and buzzing to the faded elegance of the Hostal Valencia with its antique furniture, terracotta tiled floor and warm orange-yellow flaking paint.

In the supermarket I watched a teenage boy wrap my cheese like an artist; on the Metro I saw a

Romany guitarist sing a gentle Spanish ballad as people sighed into their seats contentedly; I met an old lady on a train wearing a dress patterned with a thousand tiny roses. She chatted delightedly to me for several stops. I thought she told me her mother used to be a florist, but I couldn't be sure. I am certain however that she laughed, "You don't understand a word I said, do you?" and blew me a jaunty kiss goodbye. A man selling lighters in a bar handed me a small card which read: "It is beautiful to live in a world of sounds. I have no it." I marvelled at Picasso's *Guernica* in the Museo Nacional, thrilled by the painting's size, noise and brutality. I felt alive, wired, human. In my sketchbook I noted Maupassant's words: "We must feel, that is everything. We must feel as a brute beast, filled with nerves, feels, and knows that it has felt, and knows that each feeling shakes it like an earthquake."

It was humid, 34°. A storm began as I ran the bath, and the sounds of rain, thunder, traffic and laughter echoed up to the balcony. When the storm had broken, I took a stroll and made a call.

Bec rings from Madrid: "Guess where I am?" I can hear tooting horns and people hailing each other in Spanish. She is at Puerta del Sol. "Tres!" I cry. "I lived at Número Tres, Puerta del Sol!" Bec says she can see my old place and there's now a tourist shop beneath it. She describes several windows with shutters and balconies. "It was the middle window, second floor, I think." It was thirty years ago. We talk until her money runs out.

I had unknowingly chosen a *hostal* a few hundred yards from Mum's old apartment. I almost expected to see her open the shutters of *número tres*, lean over the balcony, and breath in the balmy, after-storm air. That night I slept with the shutters closed. The room was dark like a crypt. I dreamed of loss and woke up late, threw back the shutters, and winced like a vampire at a shaft of brilliant sunlight.

I went for *churros y chocolate* in Chocolatería San Ginés. Mum had always spoken of this place as a post-club haunt, but that day it was starkly empty. I was out too early, revealed myself a tourist. I'd been shopping and bought a rosary for Mum from the bustling tourist shop below her old apartment. Its padded box bore the address: 3, Puerta del Sol, and next to it on the tiled table, a candy-striped bag of powdered chocolate bearing an image of *churros y chocolate*. Gingerly taking the rosary from its box, I let it dangle between my fingertips. Its metal loops winked in the light and the rough wooden beads released a scent of roses.

The *chocolate* was unctuous and sweet, almost too much, the *churros* light and doughnut-like. I sat alone, feeling melancholy, haunted by the Chinese whispers of memory. I thought of Mum and her journey from the doorstep of Perth Infirmary to Madrid. I thought of the wheelchair she needed later in life, how she had it sprayed neon pink – *if they want to stare, let them stare* – and of the broad Scottish accent she retained after three decades among the Sassenachs. But most of all I thought of how Mum was glad to be an outsider in the end, willing to embrace difference. I remembered her instruction to dip the *churros* in the *chocolate* and diligently obeyed. It was good. ■

Hans-Peter is the uncle of passive boy Cute Punk and his hippy brother Clem. All bristles and pre-shave lotion, he exhales hot minty dreams to give ya goosebumps deep in the night. Hans-Peter enjoys tying his nephews up on hot afternoons and then retiring to his garage for a shandy. A lager shandy.



The Bastard in the Sandbox (aka The Ambassador of the Medusans) is a being of the most sublime culture and intelligence. Unfortunately his physical mass is so repellent the sight of him sends human beings insane. So he's confined to an old yellow sandbox. After dark, the Bastard glides down city streets pursuing teenage boys with a deadly charm. He's a slippery customer with a will of iron. A true operator. A real gem.

ONKEL HANS-PETER TRIFFT DEN BASTARD IM SANDCONTAINER
THE BASTARD IN THE SANDBOX MEETS UNCLE HANS-PETER



Uncle Hans-Peter travels the autobahn. He relaxes behind the wheel as automatic landscape speeds past him. Factories, bridges, gas stations, electricity pylons...

Hans-Peter squirms in his seat. He needs a crap. His first sphincter contraction is a reflex but consecutive contractions build into a routine. Contract. Relax. Contract. Relax. The air fresher swinging from the rear view mirror synchronises itself with his rhythmic rectum.

In the car in front Gwendolen is sitting in the passenger seat, fidgeting in discomfort. She opens the passenger door. Looks down at the road. Shuts the door. Opens the door. Looks down at the road. Shuts the door. On the hard shoulder, Kind Dog tows his hairy haunches up and down the tarmac, trying to free up a chunk of marrowbone. Back and forth. Back and forth. Opens the door. Looks down at the road. Shuts the door. Back and forth. Opens the door. Looks down at the road. Shuts the door. Back and forth. Opens the door. Contract, relax. Looks down at the road. Back and forth. Shuts the door. Contract, relax. Opens the door. Back and forth. Looks down at the road. Contract, relax. Shuts the door.

- SCREEEEEEEECCCCHHHH! Hans-Peter breaks suddenly as a yellow sandbox cuts across lanes in front of him. "Sie sollten solche Fahrzeuge nicht erlauben" he thinks angrily, "die haben noch nicht einmal Servolenkung." Uncle reaches down and clasps his Hans-Peter packet. The action reassures him and his anger subsides.

The Ambassador has a new sandbox. The latest model, streamlined with sloping lid. More aerodynamic. It's careering ahead down the autobahn. Hans-Peter puts his foot on the gas. His vehicle gains slightly but the box pulls away again. A cat-and-mouse game ensues until eventually the two vehicles ride the highway side-by-side. Hans-Peter, Ambassador, Ambassador, Hans-Peter.

Ulf tusaz pg uif Cebuse it spoodhede jo mibohibid, mpdile bodz jo mveemph doobobout boe wpaifml. If mbobule gipm mbou-gbs-babz, dber up fbui po b gwl-svo, boe cfmidle jf xbz joup lmba hylufod. (Ulf flncbtbbsa's tmlqsz uloubdnt glj ojb vq b cps't atdovm.)

Hans-Peter eyes the box warily. It's a sticky situation, yet a wave of something like gentleness envelops him. Hurting along at breakneck speed, the multi-pronged city thing that constitutes the equivalent to the Ambassador's eye peeks out from beneath the lid. Bzzzzzz. He shoots a wad of psychic snot at den Menschen in dem Automobil. Hans-Peter shrinks back in revulsion. In his indefinable squelchy end-of-the-next-sentence way, the Bastard feels perturbed by this big german begger on wheels. Perturbed might be too strong a word, mildly irritated, the way a trapped hornet might buzz around and buzz-back-to-the-last-sentence stuck in a volley. Squelch. Bzzzz. Bzzzzzzzzzz. (supra)normal suggestion of two teenage boys skipping across the prairie with erect cocks and gutted brains swinging from the sides of their skulls. Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Hans-Peter's cerebrum is stunned but not out of order. Konzeptioner' dlich Onkel! Bzzzzzzzz. Hans-Peter scurries through a supermarket precinct, guiding his nephew Clem, hairy hand positioned firmly on the back of the boy's neck. They enter a bakery to buy hot dogs. "Warte hier" says Uncle as Clem stares blankly at the pastries. Clem's parents thought of the boy as suffering from intellectual retardation. Hans-Peter prefers to think of him as a hawk. A hawk from which all solid material has been extracted; a broken remnant subject to the will of interlopers. Hans-Peter tries to fit himself into the shell that is Clem. It's a squeeze but he makes it! He wants to be the eyes behind Clem's owl gaze. Slip down, pull y'self up. Slip down -

Bzzzzzz. Come back. Bzzzzzz. Wacht auf! Hans-Peter has pulled away and the Ambassador speeds off into the sunset. Pett! thinks Hans-Peter. But some dirty deal has taken place. The hunters have tangled and transaction has occurred. Hans-Peter will drink fine wine tonight.



The Nile

Wei Kiat Chen



WE ARE knot-like: tight, coiled, and looped into each other, I feel the bones of his hips pressing hard into the soft of my side. We have been like this for hours, unmoving, moved past the keenest of our needs. It cannot last.

*

The mouth is slightly parted, soundless, but not nearly silent; there is a soft, wet whistle hiss of air, a slippage from deep inside. Tiny hairs circle the mouth, angry against the pale chin, pricks of dark like reeds poking the surface of gilded water. The hair lies heavy on these sheets, in this light a rich gold-brown against the dark purple of the cloth. The curls are large, generous, different from the small, almost circular waves that cover the chest and stomach. Those flow in a single stream from the navel, gathering might at the base of the ribs, forking finally into two rivers that break on curved pectorals and eddy in quiet pools around the nipples.

Tawny with the heat of the day, the left arm lies bent like a broken arrow, the flat of the palm resting under the head. The biceps globe the skin, causing the deep net of veins - like the mossed hair under the arms, glossy with a hint of sweat - to pulse just beneath the surface, dark blue lines that throb under the brown, echoing the grooves etched on the exposed palm, the mesh of lines snaking past the deep cuts of the mind, the life, skirting the calluses where fingers join palm, flowing to the very tips which lie coiled around the heft of the air.

*

For a long while there has been no sound other than us. A breeze stirs the pale gold curtains around the bed, scented with lotus oil, but that is all. An image comes with it, of a burnished barge hovering on the water. The wind then, perfumed too, heating us with its strokes. Fragments of piped music, of eyes upon us, cool and careful. And later, the still of mud, of silt. The water caught. A dark, solid shape of water flowing impossibly onwards.

*

It may be long past, or it is here now. What may be him, or what has slipped away, the lost other. I long with ache for him, to feel him caught in me, for him to pierce me, slide deep into me. It may not be, though we fight to get close, his penis thrusting repeatedly into me, hard as night. We swim closer to the source, only to be drawn away by deep tidal inconstancies, pulled by the moon

back to where we came from. Fighting a return, we are hurled against rock, which threatens to break, but pushes us instead back into the waves. We can smell the air, gulp greedy lungfuls of it, but we can never hold it in us, and sigh it out with teeth gritted against the loss.

*

The scent comes again, borne on the wind that waves the curtains around the bed. I cannot tell where the wind is coming from; the drapes over the windows are still. It teases the hair on my skin, stroking my eyebrows, trailing over my lashes. I part the hair around my labia, or else it does, and feel a lick of air, sharp as a tongue. Teasing and withdrawing, returning unbeckoned to startle with a shiver.

When he lies on his stomach, the wind plays with him too, darting around the hair of his shoulders. I hover my hand above this hair, willing it upwards to touch my palm, but the wind slides between us, feathering both my palm and his hair.

When he moves, the wind retreats, only to return when his breath has settled back into a steady rhythm. It toys with him, extending flirting fingers that move with a grace greater than mine.

*

From outside, the sound of quiet, soft steps, the swish of heavy cloth, muted whispers. By night the crackle of torches, the splash of water arcing from jug to dish, and the sound that moves us more than any other, that becomes our own breath, melting against the wind, heavy with our exertions - the sound of the Nile.

*

I pinch him hard and watch the deep blue blood flood back under the skin, feeling the hurt in my arm. We do not speak of it, but I know that he feels it as much as I do, keen as a blade. I take his penis in my hand, mouthing him, undoing him.

When it is slick with my spit, he says he wants to be inside me, but I shake my head. Pushing him down on the bed, my hand heavy on his chest, taking his breath away, I pull hard at the base of his penis, stretch open the dead eye at the tip, and enter him with my clitoris.

*

The river - winding and limitless - laps the banks with slow, undulating strokes; but its heart is relentless: dark water currents beneath can drag the strongest swimmer to his death. The twisting

water is thick with slime and rich with soil, heavier than the blood that flows in us, and in the day, heated by the sun, it burns hotter than freshly spilt blood. At night, under the eye of the moon, it runs colder than the water in my veins.

In a good season, the water gives life, lending strength to the crops and rewarding the men with fish. But it can also swell its banks, breaking free to consume men and crop alike, sweeping into homes, dragging all with it, enfolding them into its dark heart, greater and more quiet than the black wash that closes over one's head.

There are moments, the water swiftly rising, when one can stand as close to the sides as one dares - looking into the teasing current that could swallow you whole - and glimpse the blackness that is the heart of the river, a cracked mirror of one's face, the moment when one begins to question why we live and die by the rhythms of the river, the serpent that nourishes and unpeoples, and if these thoughts are not those of one who is already dead, dreaming that one is still gazing down into the wine-dark waves.

*

He laps at my lips with his tongue, moving about in small, ever increasing circles. He thrusts the tip inside and I feel myself resist, then acquiesce to the invasion, like an amorous pinch that stings, but is longed for. He licks the beads of moisture that have formed, pausing to tell me they are as the morning dew, but I know they are not. And then I feel the swell in me, and push his head between my legs, gushing forth the salt tainted stream into his mouth, his eyes widening puddles of surprise. I feel the silt and the slime flowing from me to him, and he swallows in great gulps, but the force is too great, splashing past his cheeks, overflowing the measure of us both.

*

He watches me as the wind glides over my stomach and then my breasts, flicking at the tips of my nipples, places his tongue has been. I shudder, and with that memory, his mouth is again on mine.

*

Our breath comes in ragged waves, in waste, competing with the sighs of the wind. We have grown urgent in our touches, insistent with attempts to reach the space that swims ever out of reach. His finger, once inserted gently into my vagina, is hard and probing, and he swivels his thumb into my anus, pinching the two together, jabbing in

and out, twisting and rocking back and forth until I feel myself tear. He continues the motion, heedless of the warm red that melts down his hand and I push myself forward, urging him on, wanting him deeper inside me.

I jab fingers into his mouth, lock them around his tongue and push until he gags, yet he continues to sustain the motion with his hand, clamped between the muscles which grip, repelling and inviting.

*

It is as mandragora - that claims one for sleep, dragging one down into the infinite depths - I dream of the Nile.

When I surface, he is watching me, but it is as if he is leagues away, swimming closer with his gaze, never near enough to see me, like straining after stars with the length of his arm. I tell him of my dream, hearing my voice still dark with sleep; he tells me he has also dreamt of the Nile. But he finds no words, and I understand: My dream, too, is made of water, and unfathomable.

*

There was a time when we knew words, when we remembered past this chamber. Eternity lingered in our eyes and lips, framed on our brows, we tasted the lotus on each other's mouths.

There are immortal longings in us.

*

It comes as a shock, realizing that the Nile empties into the sea, and continues, mingled and cloaked, but undiluted, that there is no end. That what they strain after is nothing more than what they have strained against, indistinct and unknowable, as water is in water.

*

I wake, and feel a tear or a bead of sweat pricking my cheek, and I think of him in me. But only the dark swirls around me. If he were I, if we were a length of rope with two heads, I would feel his knit with me. I would know him as I know myself, doubled over, twisted and bound. He is not here, not I. In this night, with these dreams of water, I have been washed clean and made ready.

Eros has called him away, and I must soon follow. ■

32

During the period between 1965 and 1992 the Royal Mail published a series of stamps to welcome the arrival of the Sekhon family to the United Kingdom. In recognition of their forthcoming contribution to the economy and culture of this sceptered isle, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II commissioned the publication of a series of 6 special commemorative stamps to honour Mr Shiv Dyal Singh Sekhon and his good lady wife, Mrs Swarn Kaur. Her Majesty is grateful for the significant role Mr SDS Sekhon played in the smooth running of operations at the Royal Mail, where he held a variety of positions for 27 years, ensuring the nation's mail was delivered with utmost





33

◀ care and professionalism. Unlike, I note with regret, the flipperty jibbert way it has been delivered since you retired from the service.

She would like to take this opportunity to extend her gratitude to the offspring of Mr and Mrs Sekhon: Master Raj Balbir Singh Sekhon, Miss Manmohan Kaur Sekhon and Miss Parminder Sekhon for extensive car-driving duties (5am starts and 10pm finishes), unsurpassable babysitting and dinner making duties, and awesome displays of inspirational disco-dancing routines at the Royal Mail Christmas parties, respectively.

Parminder Sekhon
The Royal Mail
Series

Letters from Paradise

fabian thomas

June 10, 2005

Dear Brian,

It's been over a year since you were murdered and I still can't bring myself to delete your e-mail address from my list of contacts. I think I'll just leave it. It will be a symbolic way of keeping in touch with you. I want to tell you I'm so sorry and angry that you had to die this way, stabbed and bludgeoned in your home by someone you knew and had been kind to. What was equally disturbing was the aftermath. Brian, the police just stood around the morning after chatting and laughing as people yelled and hurled insults and abuse at your family and friends who'd gathered in the yard: "Yes!! *Chi-chi man fi dead!*", "*Di whole a dem fi get murder!!*" "*Di whole a unoo a batty man and lesbian!!*"

Ah, yes, "One love, one heart...."

Desmond was a trooper. I have newfound respect for him. In addition to finding your body after he'd left you in the house with those two miscreants, he was determined and insisted he was able to identify one of the young men. He spoke to the police and the media about what had transpired that fateful night. Needless to say, this resulted in him being targeted, threatened, and harassed by anonymous homophobes as well as the policemen and prison staff who should have been supporting and protecting him. When they finally arrested the culprit, and Desmond went to identify him: all 6 of the men in the line-up had their heads wrapped and their faces covered in toothpaste.

Luckily, the young man confessed. When *The Star* carried the story about his confession, the emphasis and focus was that it was not a hate crime (as previously claimed by J-FLAG). The report coldly made it seem okay that he'd murdered you because you refused to give him money. Well, I'm here to tell you that Jamaicans were not prepared for the effect that your death had. It was the catalyst for an international movement against homophobia and anti-gay violence in Jamaica. Outrage spearheaded a campaign calling attention to and denouncing the hate lyrics that are rife in Reggae dancehall music (some of the main offenders like Buju Banton, Beenie Man, Bounty Killa, Sizzla, Capleton had their shows abroad cancelled), there were candlelit memorials all over the world and London's Gay Pride March was dedicated to you.

Sadly, the momentum was short-lived and things have pretty much gone back to normal in this island you loved so much. It certainly sparked the most prolonged discussion, attention and

furor in the Jamaican entertainment and tourism industry I've ever seen. Mind you, some of what folks had to say was unmitigated crap, virulent invective and incredible denial, but at least things got shaken and stirred. I hope some seeds have been planted. One such seed resulted in Sandals Resorts International, under pressure from authorities in London, removing the word 'heterosexual' from their marketing material. Of course, they were quick to point out that this amendment did not mean they were now marketing to gays and lesbians; many in the media and, of course, wider society started to cringe at the suggestion that Sandals was now opening its gates and bedrooms to gay couples.

I wish I could say that things in Jamaica have taken a turn for the better since your death. But I can't: Michael disappeared without a trace; Julius was tied up and strangled in his apartment; Oneil's (aka Carry-On) body was found bound and gagged on Matches Lane; Vincent was handed over to a mob in Mobay and beaten to death; Ricky's house was burnt down; and Jimmy was murdered, his body set alight by a house-guest he'd asked to leave the day before. The young man has been seen driving Jimmy's car, and because the police heard Jimmy was gay are doing nothing about it. This murder, and the fact that they used his own clothes to keep the body burning, reminded me of seeing the group TOK on RE Television as they explained how they change what T, O, and K stand for, depending on their mood, or "the vibe." They cheerfully shared that there are times when the letters stand for: "*Throw Oil on them and Kill them. And you know what we mean by that.... wi nuh like no bat....*" I thought of all those children watching and getting the impression that this was okay, the norm, acceptable. My heart sinks when I have to acknowledge that in Jamaica it is. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised at this display from these young men. I mean, their biggest hit to date, the one that put them on the charts in Jamaica, had this as the bridge:

From dem a par inna chi-chi man cyar (If we see them in a gay man's car)

Bring di fiya meck wi bun dem (Let's light a fire and burn them!)

From dem a drink inna chi-chi man bar (If they go to gay bars)

Bring di fiya meck wi done dem! (Let's light a fire and finish them off!)

Last year, a group of us from JAS attended a meeting in New York put together by the Human

Rights Watch to draw attention to the situation in Jamaica. As we casually talked about the stress, trauma, death and stifling realities that gay and lesbian people face in Jamaica, and as the meeting went on, I was profoundly struck by how devastated, appalled, tearful and aghast most of the people in the room were. These atrocities have become such a pervasive thread in the fabric of our lives that we've become numb. Numb so we can go on.

I left New York feeling unsettled and desperate. I thought: Why am I short-changing myself by staying in Jamaica? What's the point? Being in New York for Gay Pride didn't help either. The contrast was almost maddening, coupled with the memory that the 5 years I had lived in New York were the best, most liberating, inspiring, life-affirming years of my life. I was at my most creative, connected, at peace, part of a community, even with the inherent danger (gay-related and otherwise) of living in NYC. *Whose life is this?!* a voice inside me was screaming. I have been unable to shake the feeling that I deserve more, better. That I should be able to live with a lover, if I so choose and be able to have several housing options that allow me to do so, have my pick of clubs, bars, venues and events of the lavender/pink persuasion, be able to eat in gay restaurants, attend gay-friendly churches, feel safe, and be protected by the laws of the country I live in.

I deserve not to have to endure being bombarded by homophobic lyrics everywhere I turn (including radio stations), not to be afraid of reporting crimes against me for fear of further victimization at the hands and feet of the police. I shouldn't be able to say that I know so many people who have been murdered or victimized. Sometimes the brutish reality of my fellow Jamaicans, the silence of our political leaders and the threat of violence and death are overwhelmingly disheartening and spiritually stifling. But I dig my heels in, grit my teeth, call on my ancestors, lean on my friends, connect with my sisters (by blood and by bond), give thanks for the gift of tears, as I reaffirm the sanctity of my soul and identity.

My dear Brian, I miss you. The thing I miss most is your amazing, generous, unabashed, infectious laughter and generosity of spirit. You were and continue to be a ray of light. Thank you. Thank you for going on TV, radio, writing letters to the papers, using your name, showing your face. You were fearless and I salute you. Thanks for Entourage, which gave us another place to meet, greet, shimmy, twirl and boogie down. Last,

and by no means least, thanks for all the relationships and great sex you enabled in our otherwise stifled community!! ☺ Take a bow, Diva!
Love always,
fabian

Response to e-mail entitled: 'Thank you for the card'
June 6, 2005

Hi Paul,
U R constantly in my thoughts. I can imagine how you feel about Jimmy. It has begun 2 B surreal and truly disturbing as the death toll of gay men in Jamaica rises without rancour or debate. What makes it worse, is that all 2 often they are men I know: intimately, socially, or in passing. It is one thing 2 hear about someone U don't know, but quite another when your spirit has made their acquaintance. It's becoming clearer 2 me that I cannot stay in Jamaica, my "island in the sun." My home has become an oppressive, repressive, brutal place. Each time another gay person is victimized, beaten, discriminated against, spat on, beaten, strangled, slashed, burnt or made invisible, I think that could be me. When is it going to be my turn?

And no, the majority of Jamaicans aren't raging homophobes. What is unbearable and life-threatening, is the conspiracy of silence, the alliance of fear that makes Jamaicans (including me) just go on and not shriek, scream, and cry foul. I shudder when I remember the Government and nation's response to Human Rights Watch's report (aptly titled *Hated to Death*) about homophobia, stigma and discrimination in Jamaica: blithe dismissal and denial. Then life went on, and the discrimination, death, disappearance and mayhem continued.

I keep asking myself: how far are U willing 2 go? How many gay men and lesbians have 2 B tormented, victimized, preached at and erased? Is it worth the effort, danger, and fall-out to me, my family and friends to stand up and start the chant, the concerted effort, the mobilization necessary to make a difference? Am I willing to die for this? Is it safer and more sensible to act, speak, mobilize and agitate from a safe distance, in a place where there are laws and law enforcement to protect me? At this point, the answers elude me... But I press on...

Blessings!

fabian

Response to e-mail entitled: 'Hate Crime in Antigua'
May 16, 2005

Dear Clyde,

I read with sadness your e-mail regarding the attack on Jeffrey. Please give him my regards.

I'd also like to offer a few words of encouragement: In the wake of the horror, terror and visceral anger these attacks shower on us, it is important we rally together, offer shoulders to cry on, hands to catch the tears; tears are the salve for the wounds the attacks leave on the attacked and the community. We must stand together in love, support and action; we must choose our battles carefully; we must talk loud, make noise, but make sense. Be clear, concise and unapologetic in our activism and outcry! And we must also make sure we stay alive.

We have to challenge ourselves to be the best we can be. We cannot endorse the rampant self-hatred and shallowness. We must not prey on each other nor co-sign wrong-doing. We must promote respect, honesty and decency, and defend it in and outside our community.

As the dust settles on this attack, what do we have left? We have the world which attacks us, those who support and love us, and we have each other. We must make the choice to come together (pun intended) for more than the physical, move beyond the shallowness of outward 'fabulousness' and begin to affirm our lives, celebrate our diversity, really love each other.

Success and happiness are the best revenge. We must live and laugh out loud, be unapologetically successful, love with every fibre of our being (with 2 snaps!), be fiercely and genuinely fabulous, and dance often.

fabian



36

Vodka

Andrew Warburton

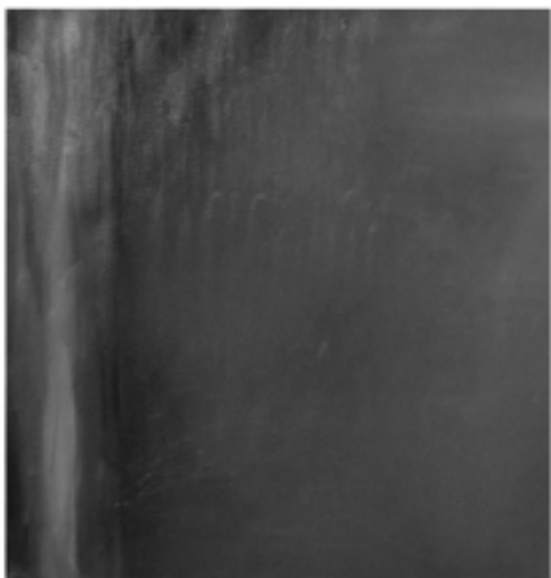
The bottle kicked by her black-stockinged foot
spilled no vodka. We'd drunk it all.
You saw our backs rotating on the floor.

My soft tongue was not shaped for the rough
dog-flesh between her legs.
The scorching of her zip.

I told you her lemon zest
was on my lips.
There was horror in your eyes.

The ice cut asymmetrically
on Moscow river
would surely cool this shame.

Or vodka. The unique sound
of splitting cubes.



37

Raffaele Teo
Self-Portrait, 1999

Rose Petals

Emily Moreton



38

THERE ARE pale pink rose petals on the coffin.

She would have preferred red. Those were always her favourite, and she didn't care that they were a cliché. Not that it matters, I suppose, and maybe red roses wouldn't be considered appropriate, but I can't get rid of this picture of her, watching us, and thinking that the least we could have done was to pick the right colour.

It's better to think that, to see that, than to see her the way she is, now.

The coffin is closed, of course, and I'm trying not to think of her trapped in a box. No need to worry that she might wake up, to hope that this is all a mistake.

She was screaming in my dreams last night, begging me to help her, and I couldn't find her, just followed her screaming that seemed to get further and further away. Ben tells me these will fade eventually, but he thinks I'm dreaming of what happened. I haven't told him different.

She was screaming for me then, as well, and they wouldn't let me in, not till much later. Then I held her hand and tried to pretend I wasn't crying when her voice faded and her hand slipped from mine.

Her parents have decided to have her cremated. I think it's sick, after what happened to her... after how she... I tried to tell them not to do it, and, later, not to take her back. They listened, very gently, but said it was their decision, and they wanted her home.

I wanted to tell them that she was home, that it should have been my decision, that it was too late now to pretend we weren't... that I was just a flat-mate, a friend. I couldn't say it, though. I don't seem able to fight any more, without her. It doesn't seem worth it.

Everyone from the clinic is here - Mina, looking stricken with guilt, Dr Alex and Dr Kim, all the nurses - bad luck on anyone who wanted to see someone today. They flew over together from Stansted, which isn't an easy connection to Bern, actually, and asked me to fly with them, but I couldn't stand to be with them so long. I know it's a terrible thing to think, but I feel like it's their fault. If someone else had offered to cover that shift, she wouldn't have been there, and - and I don't wish any of them dead, I don't, but she was my angel, and she's gone, and I just can't...

Breathe.

Ben tells me that that's the best way to get through those moments when I want to fall to the floor screaming, or break into a million pieces because...

There are pink rose petals on the coffin.

It surprises me how much of the service I can understand. Not enough to really know what they're saying, but a lot of words. I must have absorbed more of the language than I thought, though it's pitiful after four years. There's no-one to translate, either, and they don't put the hymn numbers up like they did when I went to church, a few times, years ago. It's funny the things you'll do when you want to be normal.

Funny, in the sense of making you feel like crying.

Which isn't really all that funny.

The men - her father, her big bother, her uncle, I think, and three who look the right age to be old school friends - lift the coffin, and her mother starts sobbing in earnest.

My hands twitch where they're wrung together in my lap. I want to reach out to her, to touch and comfort her one last time before she goes beyond my reach. It hurts too much to even cry, and I just want to be able to hold her hand one more time.

Some of the rose petals slide from the coffin as they lift it, and more as they start the slow walk out of the church. Her brother's crying by the time they pass me, and he looks like he might drop the coffin. I wish I could get up and take his place, be near her, but I can't move - couldn't move, even if they'd let me hold it, which they wouldn't.

In a taxi, speeding towards the airport and away from the wake I couldn't bear to go to, I find rose petals in my pocket.

The sun's setting as the plane takes off. Seen through tears, it's a surreal watercolour.

Ben says I'm crazy and I'll regret it.

Sarah says, since I'm losing a month's rent anyway, I should take the month and think about it properly.

Helen, who's been putting me up in her spare bedroom for three weeks and bringing me changes of clothes, just asks if I need help packing.

I tell them, no I won't, no I don't need to, and no, but thank you, in that order, and catch a bus to the flat where we lived for two years, where I went to bed every night and held onto her, cooked and cleaned and studied, and filled out application forms and complained about work and proof-read her thesis; lied to her parents and screamed at mine, and danced round the kitchen and put her to bed when she was drunk, and kissed her good-bye when she went to cover Mina's shift and listened to the radio news and stopped breathing.

The flat where we were us, and were going to be us forever.

It looks as though someone ought to be living here, but it doesn't feel like that. More like a film set, after hours, waiting for people to come in and bring it to life.

It won't be us any more.

I don't even know where to start. Her parents want me to box up her things and send them back. They won't come out here and do it themselves, and her mother was crying when she asked, and I couldn't say no. They said I could keep whatever I wanted, but not to throw anything away.

There are two sets of boxes - blue plastic crates for the shipping company, and cardboard boxes from Helen and the supermarket at the end of the street.

I'm trying to look at things the way her parents will. I'm censoring, trying to give them back their daughter, or the daughter they think they have - had. Except... except that, to me, everything is her, everything makes me think of my girl, the way she was.

I imagine them looking at jewellery and wondering who'd given it to her, when she hadn't mentioned a boyfriend in years. Asking where she would have worn some of those clothes, when she said she studied too much and didn't have time to go out and meet someone. Why she'd have those books, or those pictures, and who the people in some of these photos were, what the club in the background of this one was like.

For a wild moment, all of it goes into a crate, because if they want their daughter's things, they should get the genuine one, and not some picture that hasn't been real for years.

She used to cry when she talked to them on the phone. She'd smile this brilliant smile, and speak in this high, happy tone, and tears would stream down her face. I used to make her tea and hold her hand and ask if it would really be that bad to tell them - ignoring the way my parents would yell, still yell.

She'd give me the same brilliant smile and say yes.

The jewellery and clothes and books and pictures and photos go into a cardboard box. They can go with me. I'll keep the girl she really was.

Before I leave - Ben, for all his disapproval, is going to pick up the boxes tomorrow in his van and drive them to my new flat - I check the crates one last time. There's twenty-three years of someone's life in them, someone I lived with for two years, and loved for four, and I don't recognise the

girl I'm looking at. Even the photos seem different. That girl smiling out at me would never kiss me, never leave her boyfriend for me, never lie to her parents.

I've censored so well that I've censored her out of existence. Nothing in those crates is her, and that's what I'm giving her parents.

What if I've changed everything? Not just the stuff going to them, but the things that are hers that are going into the attic at the new flat, and the things that are hers, mine, or ours that are coming with me because they're so much a part of my life that I don't even know what life would be like without them.

Maybe it never happened.

Maybe there is no girl who lied to her parents. Maybe the daughter they thought they had really is the daughter they had, and the girl I thought I was with never existed, and really was only my flat-mate. And the things I think her clothes and jewellery and books are saying aren't really there at all and I'm deluding myself.

Suddenly, there are photographs everywhere, and my hands are shaking while I rip the box lids open. I only just looked at these, but I can't remember what they show, and I have to know, have to check.

I never realised we had so many photos, rolls from holidays, nights out, family occasions and graduations, for both of us, the day we moved into the flat and - stop.

More photos slither across the hall floor as I fumble for the one I dropped too hastily, and is now the one I want. Sarah took it, the day we moved in, and we've got our arms round each other and we're just about to kiss.

I don't know how long I sit staring at that photograph, staring at her, her face, her eyes. I'm not imagining, though. I didn't imagine it. She's looking at me the way I remember, with the look that says she'd leave anyone, lie to anyone, give anything, for us to be together.

I used to look at her like that, too. I did. That night when I kissed her goodbye and watched her walk away.

The photos go back in the box. That one - into my pocket.

The new flat isn't like the old one. It's on the fifth floor, and it looks out over the nice part of the city, with a view of the Cathedral ruins, if you squint. There are a few clubs, and restaurants, and it will be noisy at night. She would have hated it, would have complained constantly about the

noise and the people, and the cigarette butts in the mornings. Did complain, when I still had my old flat, and she insisted we move somewhere quieter.

The flat has one bedroom with a single bed, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a tiny living room with a table and four chairs. The walls are cream, and the curtains have pink flowers on them. Not all of the windows open, and the bathroom suite is a funny shade of green. It's expensive because it's furnished, but none of the furniture is ours and none of it makes me think of anything more than going out and buying some throw covers.

Most of the boxes Ben left in the middle of the living room are still there. The place looks even more empty than our flat did, packed up. All my life is in these boxes, and most of hers, as well. Unpacked, the objects will turn this place into a home, my home for the next... For I don't know how long. I can't imagine ever wanting anyone else here, or wanting to be with someone enough to leave.

It's bare and empty, even with the furniture, a limbo land, between life with her and life without. Sarah brought me flowers a few days ago. She said it looked like I was squatting, not like I was living here at all. She offered to find me a vase amongst all the boxes, but I told her no.

The flowers sat on the work surface until they died.

There are some things here - the kettle, a mug and a teaspoon. Toothpaste and shampoo in the bathroom. A blanket and a pillow on the bed, and a few clothes in some of the drawers. That picture of us the day we moved into the flat blue-tacked to the bedroom wall, above my bed. I look at it every morning, every evening, before I leave, when I get back, while the kettle's boiling, when I wake up in the middle of the night and hear a voice calling to me in words that I can't understand.

That photo is the only thing that's her, the only thing that proves it's real and I didn't imagine it. In this strange new world I live in, of clubs and restaurants and trendy young people who must be my age but seem light years younger, this world where no-one asks any more how I'm getting on, no-one mentions her, it's so hard to remember that that life did exist, that she did exist.

I rang Helen at two thirty-seven this morning and asked her over and over: Had we really been together? Not her and me, but me and my beautiful girl. Had it really happened, or had I dreamt it?

She said it had, and she wouldn't lie, not about that.

I should start unpacking today, really. It's been

two weeks, three weeks... or maybe it's been four - weeks, months, I'm not sure any longer. But there are two pay slips next to the phone - which I still haven't had connected - so it must be two months.

I should start unpacking. Some more cutlery, maybe some pans, and then I can cook. Ben says I'm getting too thin. He asked me when I'd last had a meal and I couldn't tell him. I do know, but he didn't want to hear that it's been three days.

I don't want to cook, and I don't belong in any of these trendy restaurants. I don't even want to listen to my friends be sympathetic, and ask me how I'm feeling, can they help, would I like to come out with them this weekend.

It's all so overwhelming. It's like stepping into a strange new world where nothing is like it was and I don't know what it will be like. She's probably sitting on her cloud, head in her hands, hair falling over her face, groaning at me. She'd think I was crazy.

I'm so scared.

I've denied her, us, to her parents for so long that I'm frightened of what will happen if I build a new life where she isn't. What will happen if I live in this flat, even with our things in it, where she has never lived, never set foot, and start to meet people who never knew her and never will.

What if I wake up one morning and find out we've denied it so long that we've denied our entire relationship out of existence?

I'll start unpacking tomorrow. I will, really.

And I'll buy red roses for the kitchen window-sill. ■



41

Judith

Minke Douwesz

an extract from *Strict*

THE SUN was hiding behind a cloud. I shivered. Judith's hang-ups were not mine. I didn't care to know the details. If she had to, she could go into therapy with someone else. I pulled out my packet of cigarettes. Earlier, I'd picked up a box of matches at the beach hut. Before I could light one, she reached into my hand and pulled the cigarette from my mouth. I looked at her, astonished.

There she stood, all freckles, hands at her sides, in her tattered jacket, looking perversely adorable. The wind blew across the dunes, bending the small tufts of grass.

Judith and me and nobody else. She could walk away or come closer. I took a step in her direction. She unzipped her jacket. There was no longer any distance between us. Her nose next to mine. My hands on her back. Our kiss was a long one.

She withdrew her lips and said something. I couldn't make out her words. The sound of the waves drowned them out. She tugged at my sleeve. "Come."

She turned and marched ahead of me, straight through the grass, up the dune. Halfway to the top, we came to a barbed wire fence. A white sign said No Trespassing. Judith hoisted herself over a post.

"You're destroying our country's coastal defences," I panted.

Judith was already on the other side. She held out her hand. "No, we're not. As long as you don't trample on anything." I crawled under the barbed wire and followed her to a sheltered hollow near the top of the dune. Calmly, Judith removed her jacket and threw it on the sand.

"Have you been here before?" I asked, impressed. "Of course not," she said.

I took my coat off. We lay down. If we looked up we could just about see the sea. Higher up, the wind blew icily. Close to the ground, out of the wind, it wasn't as cold.

Judith looked around, pleased. "Nice little spot, eh?" I nodded, waiting. Now what?

She took off her glasses and was about to put them in her rucksack. "Keep them on," I said. She smiled and placed them back on her nose.

Then, perhaps encouraged by my request, she took the initiative. Like I'd done earlier back at my house, she started to undress me. Sweater off, shirt open, vest up. Her hands were all over me while she kissed me, on my neck, in the sunken triangles above my collarbone, my breasts, my nipples, my stomach. I wanted to sit up and hold her, but she pushed me down and I let her do her thing, indulging myself, shuddering at the merest touch of her fingers on my skin. My blood was starting to tingle. And then she stopped, her head hovering at my navel.

I ran my hand through her thick hair. She rubbed her head against my palm, nuzzling against me like a kitten. She looked up. "What happens next?" she asked. I pulled her towards me. "Well, to start with, you could take off that enormous pullover," I suggested, turning on my side.

The dusk felt cold on my naked back. Judith snuggled up against me.

I could feel her nipples through her T-shirt. She reached for my waist. I undid her trouser button and she lay back, her stomach muscles moving beneath my hands. First her hips, which were hard. Then down, past the groin, where her skin was soft, so soft to the touch, and her heartbeat, still further down to the little curls and the raised arch of her pubic bone. Judith lay with her head back in the sand, her mouth open, breathing fast.

I stretched across her body, my tongue circling hers and then my hand found her swollen lips, yielding and moist, the warm opening of her cunt, my thumb on the little round button that had eagerly appeared. I was shivering. I'd forgotten what it felt like for a woman to long for your touch.

Judith moaned, shook her head and breathed my name. Her glasses were lopsided. And then I slipped into her, with one, two, then three fingers until she lifted her stomach, put her arms around me and pressed herself against my body as if she wanted to crawl into me.

"Oh, I'ds, please, don't stop now."

After I'd licked, stroked and rubbed her and she'd come again, she kept still, her eyes closed, a look of bliss on her face. I straightened her glasses and pulled her trousers up a little. My fingers left a sticky trail across her skin. I was so wet myself, my underwear felt drenched. I stole a quick look. Nothing was visible from the outside.

Judith didn't respond when I pulled away. I sat next to her in the sand. She was sprawled across the coats, her arms flung far from her body. I put my hand on her leg. My face was covered in sweat and my temples were pounding. She moved a little, like a dreamer does in their sleep, and burrowed deeper into our coats.

I looked at the blue-black sky, the line of dunes, the swaying grass, and I felt lonely. I felt as if I'd been invited to a buffet of sweet-smelling dishes, had a few nibbles, and was sent away, my mouth still watering. That's how it had often been with Francine. I'd always thought it was my fault. Too inhibited, too tense. But I'd been spontaneous today. Judith must have been too caught up in herself to notice me. Was it healthy self-interest or intolerable self-centredness?

The crackling sound of me lighting a cigarette made her open her eyes. She looked at me tender-

ly, lifted herself up a little and adjusted her clothes. Tucked in her shirt, zipped up her trousers, buttoned up.

"So, this is what you do," she said. It felt like a slap in the face. I don't know what I'd expected, but certainly not this cold observation, as if she wasn't involved in any of it.

I concentrated on tucking in my shirt. "Yes, now you know what happens next," I said. My cynicism escaped her. "It was great," she said.

I felt cranky all of a sudden, rolled onto my stomach, away from her, and pulled on my cigarette. She peered at me, "Anything wrong?" I hesitated, not knowing what to say. My anger surged. "Just let me smoke for a bit."

"I can't believe you need a cigarette now. I feel fine without one." I liked hearing her repeat how good she felt. At least I hadn't been wrong about her body. "You're quite rash, you know. I mean, I could have had my period."

"Rash? I've been dreaming about this for months," I said. I stubbed my cigarette out in the sand. Judith fixed up her hair. She still looked pleased.

"And you're experienced. I didn't know what it would be like, with a woman. It wasn't bad at all," she said. Her exclamations of delight were starting to get on my nerves. I was angry and my hands were trembling as I buttoned up my shirt. Couldn't she tell that half my circulating volume was below my navel and begging for redistribution?

She knelt down and brushed the sand off her clothes. I pulled the packet of cigarettes out of my pocket. "Are you also starving?" she asked. I shook my head. She got up. "Strange, isn't it? I never felt like eating when I was at your place. But now I feel like I'm about to faint."

"Ten toe bends and you'll feel just fine," I suggested.

She blew on her glasses and wiped them with the hem of her jacket. "Maybe you should do the same," she said.

I looked up. She put her glasses back on, brushed her hair from her face and held my gaze. If only she wasn't so beautiful.

Then she dropped down on top of me. Her weight pushed the air from my lungs and made me cough. I threw my cigarette away. She held my hands and pushed them into the sand. The ground was hard beneath the top layer. "You're a prickly thing". She breathed against my neck, pursing her lips for a kiss.

"More like a hedgehog that's just been run over," I muttered.

I could feel her teeth on my skin. She bit down hard and I arched my back. Then she rolled away.

"I can see that you're not going to let me," she said, her head tilted.

"No," I said.

I stood up and put my coat back, sealed it tight.

Judith sat there with her legs spread and her arms stretched out behind her. "Listen, all of this is new to me," she said. "I'm just relieved it's over. I've been tense all afternoon."

Apparently she knew we were going to have sex. She must be pretty confident about her irresistibility. So if it wasn't a surprise to her, why the passivity? Didn't she find me attractive enough?

She picked up her rucksack. I waded through the grass up to the fence. Judith was still in the hollow, maybe checking whether we'd left anything behind. I swung my right leg over the barbed wire. The left one got caught. I tore myself free and heard the cloth rip. I swore under my breath. Forgive me, God, for being so selfish.

I retraced our steps in the sand and waited for her at the bottom of the dune. My neck hurt where she'd bitten me. The last rays of sun made a thin veil on the horizon. The sky was clear. The cold calmed me as we walked, bent double against the wind, back towards the beach hut.

"What difference does it make, man or woman?" I wanted to know.

"I didn't know what to expect with you."

"So the only difference is your indecision," I concluded. My irritability was rearing its ugly head again.

"No," Judith faltered. "I've never felt so turned on before."

I blushed. I'm always too quick to get angry. "Women have the undeniable advantage of being able to come several times in a row," I said obligingly, as if advertising a particular brand of vacuum cleaner. "Men need to recover."

Judith looked hurt. "I behaved like a guy," she said, dismayed. "Nodding off like that after I'd come."

"Several times," I corrected her. "And then zipping up afterwards."

Judith laughed. "Not all men do that, you know." I shrugged. "I'll take your word for it."

Further up, at the top of the dune, the lights were dimmed at the beach hut. Judith would have to go hungry a little longer. She checked her watch.

"We'll have to get chips in the village," I said. She didn't seem to mind.

"Of course you'll have to go and get tested now. For next time," she said.

My scarf was itchy. I jerked my head. "What's that?"

Judith hoisted up her rucksack. "Yes, otherwise I'll be scared to touch you. I'm HIV negative, as you know."

I clenched my fists in my pockets. "You're out of your mind."

She looked at me with genuine surprise. "Why do you say that?"

My hands flew out to emphasise my indignation. "Surely it's not normal, that irrational fear of yours. You're insulting people who really are ill. You shouldn't feed this kind of obsession. I won't go and have a test just because you're ill-informed."

"I actually read a health promotion brochure the other day," she defended herself.

I cut her short. "Women can't infect each other, all those venereal diseases are passed on by men." I was reminded of a classmate who'd shared a bed with a girl she'd picked up at the gay and lesbian centre, and then started itching. Her doctor diagnosed crabs and gave her a bottle of shampoo. The girl was never seen in Amsterdam again.

Judith faced me, her hands thrusting her jacket pockets out in front of her. I slowed down. She looked like she was ready for a fight. "You're a doctor, you can't be serious. Why were dental dams invented, then?"

Hearing that phrase from her lips tickled me. She wasn't as naïve as she made out to be. Still, I was irritated by the fact that she'd looked into the matter. Had she done it just to determine the safety of women's sexual practices?

"In theory, they can, yes. I've read the odd brochure myself. But you can't really include me in any high-risk group. My sexual history isn't exactly full of rough sex, promiscuity or bisexual encounters," I said.

"But Francine's is," she countered. The wind blew her hair back.

"Francine and I had a long relationship, but we hardly ever had sex," I said.

"And how about that English woman, on holiday."

"Kathleen." I moved away from Judith.

"And the nurse."

I stepped up my pace. "I'm not about to join you in analysing all the women I've ever fancied," I shouted back over my shoulder. "As much as I'm familiar with their histories."

"And I don't feel like using dental dams," Judith shouted. She ran to catch up with me. "They look fiddly."

"They're dreadful."

We'd passed the beach hut. The entrance we'd used earlier was still quite far away. It would soon be dark on the dunes between the beach and the village. We walked on without saying anything. It wasn't as pleasant as the earlier silence.

Before we left the beach, I turned to face the sea. The moon was almost full. It left a fairy-tale shimmer on the water. Judith stood behind me. The tension between us was palpable, almost electric. My mouth was dry.

"The good news is that you'd like to do it again."

She put her hand on my shoulder. Her voice was close. "Please," she said, as if confirming an order in a restaurant. "But let's not rush into it. We're not adolescents anymore, Idske." Her breath on my ear, the pressure of her fingers, the smell of her skin, all made me want to touch her again. I stared at the sea. My eyes misted up. I'd warned her.

"Let's face it, neither of us is impulsive," I replied, sinking into my collar to hide my tears from her. "Shall we go?"

It was my own fault. I shouldn't have fallen in love with her. I turned around. Judith looked at the dunes. "It's pretty dark," she said.

"If we run into anyone looking for trouble, I'll beat him up."

Judith took my face and held it in her hands. "I'm sorry," she said.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "It's okay," I said, "We'll see. I'm flexible when it comes to relationships."

"No, you're not, and I don't want you to say you are." She sounded moved. I freed my head and made for the gravel path that had led us to the beach. It was difficult to see it in the shadow of the dunes. "If I let you have your hang-ups, you must let me have mine," I said. Judith walked beside me in silence. She appeared to be thinking. "Okay," she said, as we reached the path. ■

Translated for *Chroma* by Laura Vroomen

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45

Kobi Israel
Untitled

The Long Losing

Peter McGraith



CAUGHT ON the fertile Autumn wind gusting between the trailer homes, the weighty jangle of Stella's keys signaled her approach; young Sandra Trainor hid her right hand behind her back and tendered an imploring "Hi" as traces of her complicity swirled in the air; and Stella's dog raised itself, whining its welcome, one begrudging note bending upwards into another, and sniffed its way towards the door and the oncoming sweet blast of cooling night. The aluminum rang soft and short under paws and gritty leather soles, Stella fingering through the dog's white scruff, as they passed on the stairs.

She stepped in, home, onto the mat, holding firm to the door handle against the forceful draw of the wind, bringing the door to a controlled - click - closure. Normalcy. She walked out of her sneakers across the hush of thick carpet, drew the drapes, turned on the lights and flung her jacket down. No messages on the telephone. It was 2am. She took a carton of reduced-fat milk from the refrigerator and sat down, lifting her laptop computer from the glass table, tucking her feet up under her.

An email had arrived.

There was no relief to it. It was flat, emotionless. As though they hadn't ever spent the Holidays together, as though he'd never fooled around on her bed with her only son while she'd been out working nights at the Lakeshore Late Store, as though they weren't almost in-laws. Not even the courtesy of a telephone call, nor the urgency. As though passing on the terrible news to her were a formality.

It read:

Stella

Eddie is ill. I'm sure he'd appreciate it if you were able to visit. Please call me.

Bill

As though it had been measured to hurt, then delivered like a blow.

There were no two ways about it, Stella would have to leave for England, as soon as it could be arranged. There had been a couple of worrying stretches over the previous two years when all news from her son in London had ceased. And then, when Eddie had finally called, he had sounded vague and fragile, admitting to having been off-colour. He'd told her he never liked to call her unless everything was "hunky-dory." She knew it had to be more serious this time, or Bill wouldn't have emailed, not in that manner. Stella's gut fluttered and churned. Her worst fear, long held, now coming to pass, was suddenly secondary to her dread of facing a man she had little in common

with, except for her son. She didn't want to see or talk to Bill. She had nothing to say to him.

In near silence she set about packing, only turning on NPR when the sun started warming the back side of the horizon. She made two lists. Items she could borrow: blouses from Lurelle, Maxine's midnight blue trouser-suit, a decent suitcase from somebody, Conny indubitably had a spare in her crawl space, and shoes. The To Do list: raising the cash for the trip, purchasing tickets, contacting her employers; the dog, who to leave him with, the Halstucs, or Lurelle - would she have him? Or the Trainors? No. Left alone with Junior, Sandra Trainor would soon get around to blowing marijuana smoke up his snout. Or God knows what!

At 7.30 she got on the telephone to her daughter.

Lurelle was already awake and preparing waffles for Tony and little Bonnie. "Wow, Mom, this is early!" she blasted, over the blare of the television, the sizzle of the pan, and the hiss of the pines from outside her open kitchen window.

Stella cleared her throat, "Yeah, well, it's kinda urgent, Lurelle - it's Eddie."

Lurelle shot a look at Tony to get him to deal with the breakfast. She pressed the telephone hard against her ear and cupped her free hand over her other ear to block out the din, as Stella relayed Bill's email, word for word. And, to the point as his message was, they agreed that it was evading the issue. Still, they themselves avoided putting a name to what was ailing Ed. Things were bad enough as they were. Instead they shared their antipathy for Bill. "Well, Mom, if this *does* turn out to be anything to do with that jerk, I'd haul his ass into court in a New York minute."

"I don't think that would stand up, Lurelle."

By Bill's well-to-do standards Stella was dirt-poor. He couldn't have helped but notice. When he had come visiting with her boy Eddie, he had seen that she was working all hours at the store, plus the cleaning work in the mornings, and two evenings per week in Shenanigans. She was making ends meet, but every unexpected expense was a hassle and every luxury had to be saved for, and Bill knew it. And him with his pockets so full of greenbacks he could have blown his turned-up nose on the stuff. He could have wiped his big ole gay ass with it. Two round trip tickets for her and Lurelle wouldn't have broken the bank, but if he wasn't offering, then she wasn't going to lower herself by asking for his charity. His stinginess stuck in her gullet like the acid tang of vomit. At a time like *this*. And more than likely the cheap English son-of-a had enough Frequent Flier Miles saved up to get him to the

moon and back, first class.

The disappointing thing was, he was quite capable of being gentlemanly, when it pleased him. Even Stella's momma, not noted for kindness towards queer sorts, had said he was "nice as new shoes" and wouldn't hear of Lurelle badmouthing him with the moniker "Three Dollar Bill." You could never rely on anyone taking your side in things, Stella had learnt, not even your own mother.

Christmas '99, he had shown up with Eddie wielding all sorts of expensive gifts. Obviously Ed had chosen them, but Bill had to have paid for them: a genuine cashmere tracksuit, and diamonds, for Christ's sake - a beautiful little pair of stud earrings, a wicker food hamper from a big store in London, and a whole bunch of stuff. The presents were gorgeous. It had made her feel uncomfortable. Showed her up as being unsophisticated and cheap. Stella squirmed every time the scene came back to her. How she almost didn't want to tell them she'd bought them a small something. And Ed saying, "How lovely, Mom. You really shouldn't have." Lovely - who ever said *lovely*? And her replying, "It's nothing, you might not like it anyway." And, clear as day, she could still hear Ed, "If you haven't kept the receipt we could always re-gift it." And then they had snickered in her face. It was a mean-spirited way of being generous.

She could have bought a new car with the kind of cash that they had thrown around that Christmas, and right now she was contemplating taking on debt to pay for her flight to London. People with money were clueless, they ought to learn how to use it properly, have more concern for less well-off folks, or have it all taken away from them.

Having seriously weighed the pros and cons of instant-credit against theft, and finding that neither was a practicable option, Stella came upon the idea of making an internet search concerning valuations, and soon she was heading downtown for the pawnbroker's with the gold Rolex Oyster Perpetual Date gent's wrist watch, and just in case she also packed her treasured heirloom, her long-dead daddy's squeezebox. This was the first time she'd set foot in Workman's Pawn since she'd sold them her old golfball typewriter in 1989. There had been no emergency back then, no particular pressing need for fast cash, so she had been in a strong bargaining position, and still she had only got half as much as she'd been hoping for. Perfect as it was, she was selling it a year too late, they'd said. Most folks were looking for computers by that time. She needed to be successful this time.

She wasn't going to have anyone tell her afterwards that she hadn't been there for her boy.

The shrill door buzzer, as acute as a dentist's drill, sent a flash through her nerves as she entered. Stella rehearsed a sales pitch as she waited in line behind two under-dressed Chinese girls in pastel Bermudas, and a greasy round man in his fifties - pawnshops and casinos must attract similar sorts, she decided. She tried to reassure herself that the watch was in mint condition, still in its original box with its certificate of authenticity. It had always been a totem of their rotten relationship. Back in '83, when the marriage was heading downhill like a behemoth on roller-skates, she had removed it from Marty's wrist after he had been brought home from the club one night, comatose. And then spent a month in terror. The watch went into hiding; it was to be Eddie's inheritance.

Her turn eventually came. "Hi, what can we do for you today?" the guy said, smarmy as a counselor, and before she could get out much of a reply, he had disappeared into the back shop with the box, leaving Stella behind the security screen in the tight, grimy cubicle for ten whole minutes, fretting about where the hell he had gone with her most valuable possession. He had better not try and swap it for a fake.

"Terms are here in brief on back of your ticket and in full on this document, if you'd like to read and sign, please." No discussion. The price was already printed on the form.

Times were very good and getting better when Marty, big Mr. Deal-Maker, had bought himself the Rolex, but even then Stella had seethed at his macho posturing. A gold Rolex - who the hell did he think he was? And here she was, hocking the watch for one-thousand two-hundred fifty bucks. At any other time, accepting such a piddling price might have ripped the ass out of her dignity, but the news from England had thrown a wet blanket on her fire. And anyhow, the lower the value on the pawn ticket, the sooner she'd be able to buy it back and sell it on to a dealer or a collector at a more appropriate price. She had learned from the internet that the watch was highly sought after now and worth around \$13,000, apparently. She would take the receipt to London and maybe Bill and Ed would offer to buy it back for her. Maybe he'd never see any inheritance.

Stella wasn't ever going to look like a fashion plate, but her momma's training meant she would at least arrive in London appropriately dressed; prepared and dignified, minus her trademark red

nylon puffa jacket with the suede yolk and the multi-banded knit cuffing. She figured she needed a smartly tailored coat, a black one. She found herself deeply excited, guiltily so, at the idea of dressing sharply, of wardrobe planning for a visit that might turn out to be...

At Jensen's, with the confidence of cash in hand, she jewed the manager down by a whole forty bucks on a knee-length, slim-cut, high-collared coat in a medium weight wool, then spent some of what she had saved on a neat, black turtle-neck sweater, partly as a reciprocation of goodwill for the store-keeper, but mostly because she could imagine herself looking a million dollars in the new coat and the sweater, along with her Ray-Ban's, her beautiful black cowboy boots and Lurelle's tight denims. It had been so long since Stella had worked a look. Ordinarily she wasn't much bothered about what she wore, but more than that she'd become so unaccustomed to dressing as she desired, that she now felt inhibited about turning it on; she knew she still could, but to do so would let people see under the surface, to the fantasy, to her core. She couldn't live with fantasies or scorn.

She would do Ed proud, turn some heads and make a glamorous entrance at his hospital bedside, if that's where he was. That would tickle him. Perhaps Maxine's trouser-suit and a pair of heels for first impressions. She thought about Maxine, about how provocatively she dressed, never giving a damn as to who was enjoying the view. What would Maxine wear on such an occasion? Christ, it didn't bear thinking about - but good for her, Maxine was free. Everything low-cut and figure-hugging. Nail extensions like talons. The teeny gold heart charm that dangled on a ring from the nail of her little finger - a present to herself for ditching Phil. The rock chick raven-black hair, and bird-like shoulder blades moving under velvet sun-shy flesh. Maxine was no ravishing beauty, she was no Anne Margaret, but she had 'it'. Stella, on the other hand, had always been a back-of-the-bus kind of gal - with none of that pizzazz about her. What she did have, though, were eyes like pale sparkling gemstones and bone structure that a hundred people said was a masterpiece of symmetry. Make-up and fine clothes might have turned her into a movie star, Marty always said: Katherine Hepburn or Rita Hayworth. But Stella never felt comfortable in the clothes he wanted to dress her up in. They sure had different ideas about what was dignified, or even sexy.

Stella called into the store and asked her boss

if she might have a minute with him in the office. Sam sat her down and listened as she asked for time off "to attend to some personal business with Ed in England." She was choked and didn't have the right words for the one hundred dollars of a gift Sam gave her along with the advance of wages she asked for. No words were needed. Sam could have guessed at the whole story. He respected her need for privacy and gave her the time off without inquiry, saying the store would survive just fine without her, however long she'd be gone. Stella might have raised an eyebrow in a well-humored but defiant reply - she was the backbone of that business, and they both knew it - but under the circumstances she let it go. The worry over Ed was enervating.

Sam had seen Stella's boy grow since the kid was in elementary school, fifteen years or more, and on recent homecomings it had become plain to him and anyone with eyes that the boy had grown up preferring men, the way everyone had expected, no matter what Stella might have wanted. And since Lurelle's wedding on Presidents' Day 2001, when Eddie, looking somewhat drawn, had come home with his man-friend in tow, there had been loose talk about his state of health, but it wasn't a subject Sam would ever broach with Stella.

The business of planning the trip was concluded.

Lights on high-beam, they headed down the rainy interstate in Lurelle's beat-up run-around from Mullan's Collision Center, and still neither of them had spoken to Bill. Stella had left a message on his answering service at home, saying that she was on her way to London in a day or so, and that Lurelle would call to pass on the flight number and expected arrival time, and could he arrange to have her picked up at the other end.

At the airport drop-off point, Lurelle got the luggage out of the car as Stella checked and double-checked everything was in order. Lurelle hugged her mother tightly, with more love and desperation than she had hugged anyone since the day she had married Tony. And when Stella was out of sight she sat herself down on a fire plug and howled into her hands like a helpless wretch. She didn't ever want to lose a child. Her little Bonnie was everything to her.

Forty-six years Stella had spent on Pacific Standard Time. Apart from a short trip to Portland with Marty before Lurelle and Eddie were in school, and a girls' vacation to Tijuana and California with Maxine back in '74, Stella hadn't been out of state. And now, forty hours after receiving Bill's email, she was in an aisle seat on

a BA night flight out of Sea-Tac for London, Heathrow, heading up towards Greenland and over the ocean for the first time in her life, sinking and folding into herself.

Tijuana and California 1974. What an adventure. It wasn't really an affair, Stella reasoned, because neither she nor Maxine was actually a lesbian, nor were they in love, but whatever it was, it had the purifying power of a wild fire, blazing through Stella's inhibitions, briefly. The kind of thing that starts with a spontaneous explosion of abandon and joy, and, as she knew, could easily end on Springer. In this instance, it had resulted in Stella marrying the first man who asked.

Maxine had told her once that gay men could be as misogynistic as wife-beaters. "I love gay men, don't get me wrong, Stella," she said, "but they are so up themselves and each other that they don't even consider they might have any affinity with dykes. There's precious little solidarity going on there. And as for other women, they're just beards." Maxine was always referring to 'friends' who were gay and lesbian. Stella sometimes wondered who these mysterious friends were - people from work? - and why no one ever got to meet them, though she loved the way you couldn't tell what the truth was with Maxine. They were unlikely friends but true friends, and their little fling remained their secret, as far as Stella knew.

A domino effect of headphone activity was coming her way and instinctively Stella joined in, tearing open the plastic bag, plugging-in like the people around her. She searched the dial for some easy listening, something for the heart-sick. Something to remember later. At times like this, every star and cloud, every news story, every song and every word, everything, was portentous. And Stella was looking for signs.

After drinks had been served, a stewardess came round offering salmon pasta or a sweet and sour pork wrap. Stella gave a slow, emphatic shake of her gray blonde head and stared up from behind a desperate tangle of fingers that clutched a pendant to her mouth. If the others on the flight were able to surmise that she was going through a tragedy, then abstinence from the meal might make them appreciate the enormity of it; and anyway she had an eight inch hoagie from Henderson's in her purse for later if she needed it, as well as some of Anita's valium. "Just another glass of dry white wine, please."

The opaline lozenge clicked and clicked against her unc cosmetized teeth. She checked her-

self for counting down the hours and concentrated instead on the necklace. She had seldom worn it in fifteen years. It had come from Eddie; from his entrepreneurship in yard work for old folks; from her Sear's catalog that he could read for hours at a time; from his fascination with pretty, shiny things; and from his desire to see his momma look more womanly like his Aunt Kathleen, his daddy's sister - the Duchess, as Stella called her - a realtor, and didn't she look every bit the part, up to her neck in social churchianity.

She closed her eyes. A still speck in the midst of a delirium of engine noise. Readying herself to reenter her hurt and her love for her boy, a penitent girl again, back in the pews of her childhood, beseeching her maker for a state of blamelessness. She conjured pictures of Eddie.

At forty months. His face, pained with a terrible ear problem, yet beatific, after a nasty fall, in a high, gray-painted bed in St. Francis of Federal Way. Poor lamb; the concussion had him weird for six weeks - till Thanksgiving.

Back at the bungalow she and Marty had rented through the early Eighties: Eddie passing contented hours on the forced-air vent in the family room, under a tent made from a felt blanket and two ladder-backed chairs, feeding jelly beans to his toy dolls. Pinks, yellows, whites, and peachy-colored ones for Kew-pie, and the strong colors for Action Man.

In her first trailer home down at Laradew, when he was six and Lurelle was eight - having to dress him up for the zillionth time in his short, little moleskin Injun suit with the red beaded fringing, to get him to eat beans again, because that was all she could afford. And him repeating after her, "Yep, we's well fed and we's safe from the cowboys now, Mom." And Stella picturing Marty as the outlaw every time. Him and his lies and his promises and his wandering. And that god-awful key club of his, a jumped-up bucket shop, full of insignificants and contemptibles.

The image of fragile little Ed in hospital clung to her, or she to it. His pallid face.

Her skin tightened into a shiver on recalling Eddie, topless, aged four and a half years, stepping out of the old Studebaker at Grandma Muslek's after a long overnight drive, and him taking the stoop steps like a petite wedding belle in a big Miss Scarlet gown, genteelly pinching and lifting the long legs of his striped pajama trousers. And this the first sight of him Marty's mother had had since the kid was out of diapers! How utterly unaware he was, and pretty as a wild flower, too.

Stella entering the quiet buzz of a hospital administration office: a bank of desks, soft lighting, heads huddled close to VDUs with roll-down barreled screens - curiously like a row of Vegas slot machines. Lines and lines of data, black text on a background of alternating horizontal stripes of white and gray, scrolling down slowly. An anodyne woman lifts her face to speak, her sandy coloration aglow in the computer's light, *"This is supposed to be for medical staff only, but you can log on sometime: the passcode is GETWELLSON. There are three cures in here but they're not available without insurance. Would you like a print out?"*

"Excuse me, ma'am, would you like a..." Jolt. Another stewardess, coffee pot, trite smile.

"No. I'm fine," embarrassedly wiping the drool from her cold chin.

In her ears Louis Armstrong's honeyed growl was fading *...erful world. Oh, yeahhhss!*and then strumming, jangling, the guitar of Joni Mitchell was coming up...

*I am on a lonely road and I am traveling, traveling, traveling, traveling,
Looking for something - what can it be?
Oh, I hate you son, I hate you son, I love you son.
Oh, I love you when I forget about me.
I wanna be strong, I wanna laugh along,
I wanna belong to the living,
Alive, alive, I wanna get up and jive,
I wanna wreck my stockings in some jukebox dive.*

The words struck Stella, though Joni certainly didn't sound too lonely or troubled. She sounded like a demanding lady who gets what she wants, rolling fast and optimistic through her song like she could control her destiny.

I wanna talk to you. I wanna renew you

Stella contemplated her life as a parent. One long, slow process of losing. Firstly and always, there was the battle not to lose the kids' affections to Marty. They never associated their daddy with the tough times. Going without and parental discipline were always Stella's problems. And the less he showed face, the more he became the maligned anti-hero; generous and wayward and handsome. That was a real bitch.

Then there was the unexpected pain of losing out to Ed's first high school fag hag, Heather Dobson. She was momsy and smothering; that's what had annoyed Stella most. She wasn't even like the fag hags you see on television shows - kooky and campy but leggy and glamorous with it. No, Heather was the homeliest of girls who only ever wore sequins on her sweatshirts - out-

size sweatshirts. Heather the feather. All of that confiding, night after night, excluding the woman who had brought him into the world. People ought to hold on to their own confidences, Stella always believed.

Then there was the lure of college out of state. It was almost inevitable, but, still, it was the first physical separation, and it hurt like hell.

And then Europe - losing out to the other side of the frickin globe. What was wrong with California? And now she might be losing him to AIDS: somewhere more difficult to get back from than Europe. All that remained was the matter of waiting for him to die, and then perpetual grieving.

The plane circled over patchwork fields and a dense but relatively low-rise cityscape, touching down within twenty minutes of the expected time. On the ground again she could feel gravity at work, oppressive and draining. And now, what?

Immediately through Customs she found herself facing a corral of relatives, lovers and friends, and, conspicuous amongst them, drivers and other professional greeters in sports jackets and suits. Standing three or four people back in the throng, a woman was holding up a piece of paper, Stella's life story in three words: Stella Daly Muslek. Whether it was emotional exhaustion or that she was medicated and had had several glasses of wine, Stella just wanted to slump onto the cool tiled floor and be taken care of like an imbecile, but she walked on, pushing her luggage trolley towards the woman.

Proffering a hand and a soft smile that Stella scrutinized for any news, the woman said, "Stella? Hello, how do you do. I'm Angie. I'm a friend of Bill and Ed's," in a British accent that was all chalk and marzipan.

"Hi. Stella," she replied, feeling foolish and disinclined to talk or hear, avoiding the woman's gaze and instead taking in the curly brown hair and the overall statement of effortless European womanliness. Shaking hands. Was this Ed's nearest and dearest, next to Bill? A hand shaker. Stella remained taciturn, but somewhat impressed, maybe they weren't so misogynistic after all. This woman was part of Ed's life; where she wanted to be. A possible ally.

"You must be exhausted," the woman said, and Stella closed her eyes and nodded. Angie was conscious that this un-traveled American mother had just flown thousands of miles, dreading and not knowing. She took control of the luggage trolley and led Stella away. The Stella persona that Ed and Bill had evoked through comic

characterizations and bitchery disappeared in the honesty of their first lingering eye contact, and although Angie couldn't yet know the real Stella, she now knew that Stella was real. She was just a woman, a mother in pain, and a little lost.

"Are you driving?"

"No, I'm sorry, I don't have a car. I live and work in the city centre. We're going to take the tube - the Underground train - if that's alright," and she smiled an unexpectedly cheerful smile.

Not knowing how ill Ed might be, Stella wondered if it had been agreed between Bill and this woman that he would take responsibility for telling her how Ed was. But if that was the plan then where was he now? Stella didn't want to squeeze this woman for terrible news, right here, walking through the airport. Even a simple 'where is he?' or 'how is he?' could lead to a big weepy scene. They both understood this.

They stood under strip lighting on the concrete platform of the airport Underground station audibly breathing the same stagnant, chill air, warming to each other as they watched the black, silted mice scurrying down beside the tracks.

Their train came rumbling and screeching into the station, it filled with travelers and airport workers and moved off, back into the tunnel. It sped on, finding a therapeutic rhythm, and soon up a gradient, emerging out into the blue-white brilliance of morning. Stella received the day like a startling new phenomenon. It was perfect Thanksgiving weather. At station after station the doors slid open and the wind nipped in around warm ankles and tired knees, cutting in between suitcases and snowboards bound for attics. Everyone with a cell phone, even the old ethnic guy wearing the turban and the most bizarre thing - a beard net. A mess of suburbs rushed by. Stella and Angie were seated together with their backs to the window, between an attractive suede-head mulatto boy in dusty sweatpants and workman's boots, and a cookie-cutter urbanite, young woman with her no-nonsense expression fixed intently in her make-up mirror. Stella turned to the window to take it all in: the sloping trackside back yards - one with a Quonset hut, a neat golf course, lamp posts and trees.

"So, is this London?"

Angie examined it critically and was surprised to see beauty in the sprawl,

"I guess it must be."

Together they looked.

"He's doing a lot better now, Stella," Angie said, looking kindly into Stella's welling eyes, and

Stella, pursing her lips, nodded, nodded.

Stella stared anew at a fluid world, with some hope and excitement, aware of her unattained capacity for love. Misshapen social housing blocks, four very different dogs with one walker, a few cruddy shopping streets thriving with poverty, and un-American vehicles dazzling in the bright silvery light, all came and went, then, suddenly, row after row of hideously quaint red-brick two-storey houses with wet roofs, a playing field, factories that looked like they might make plain English 'biscuits,' a junk yard, light engineering units and warehouses all packed in tight, a tall construction-site crane with a full-sized Christmas tree on top, and there on the verge in among the last volatile blobs of melting snow - "Look!" Stella grabbed Angie's shoulder - a curled fox, basking. ■

Reviews

THE MAN WHO FELL IN LOVE WITH AN ARSEHOLE

Paul Kane on Ian Philips' *Satyriasis Literotica*²

IN *SATYRIASIS Literotica*² the great god Pan invites the reader to a pastoral orgy to partake of the polymorphous fruits of a fecund, feral imagination. Pan acts as Master of Ceremonies in Ian Philips's collection, making an appearance in its opening and closing stories. And, naturally, you'd be wise to accept his kind invitation.

Of the 16 stories on offer, "Overexposed" is one of the most intriguing. A voyeur surreptitiously photographs other guys as he passes them in the street (face fetishists, aren't they the freakiest?) then meets Mr. Right when a photo is handed to him, name and telephone number scrawled on the back. The story makes some telling points about the dominance of the visual in our erotic lives, and Philips has his own variation ("I'm all about the eye") on Isherwood's famous line ("I am a camera").

"Shameless Self-Promotion" is a witty and cruel tale about a man who falls in love with an arsehole:

It was delicate and yet textured - like the creases formed when layers of silk are placed one atop the other. And it subtly writhed when I touched it with the tip of my tongue.

Unfortunately for our lover, he soon realises that "to enjoy the hole I have to suffer the ass that grows around it." Isn't that often the way?

Written in the form of a memoir, "Stripping Towards Gomorrah" is an exquisite fragment in which Queen Anne remembers her dalliance with a young man whom her husband James I had previously enjoyed. The Queen reflects at one point that "perhaps the most intimate differences between Adam and Eve are more subtle than our learned men would like us to believe." And indeed this is a key theme for Philips: we are marvellous creatures, and the crass dichotomies that are our everyday currency (masculine/feminine, gay/straight, top/bottom, femme/butch) can hardly hope to do us justice. Philips's mission is to subvert these.

Phil Andros was a member of Gertrude Stein's circle for a brief time, so when a story begins with "A cock is a cock is a cock," one hopes that it might shed light on one of the big issues of our time. Is there a qualitative difference between a straight man and a gay man's cock? "Heterodoxy" is a meditation on the sacred chalice of masculinity itself; and if no clear conclusion is reached,

there is still much of interest in the direction and digression of the narrator's thought.

The outstanding story in the book is undoubtedly "Shrimboat Willie," which is yet another demonstration that the most despairing siren songs are the most beautiful. In dark Gothic prose with distinct echoes of Melville, Philips gives us weirdness (here, big toe fetishism) and a romance where love is not reciprocated. The experience of love is always real, Philips tells us, even when you're deluded or being used.

"Just Another Lesbian Potluck" closes the book, and it is here where Pan sets out his envoi and makes a final farewell. Before that, we get a comedy of manners, San Franciscan style. Clark and Jody attend a lesbian party with a Roman theme, slave-girls and all. There's a love triangle in that Jody is an ex of Lezzie Beddeath's, the hostess of the party, but this was when Jody was a woman. Amidst the sadomasochism and party games, the debauchery and mayhem, old resentments resurface. This is Mike Leigh territory, but not as we know it; someone's queered the pitch.

In all his stories, Philips is both erotic and subversive. *Satyriasis Literotica*² is a kind of wonderful bestiary, presided over by Pan, or his fabulist-on-earth, Ian Philips.

Suspect Thoughts Press, 2004, 304 pages, £9.99

CRIME AND PASSION

Helen Sandler on Lauren Sanders' *With or Without You*

OUR HEROINE Lillian Speck is an intelligent but deluded young woman who has stalked and killed the soap-opera actress she adored. The narrative alternates between the story leading up to the murder and her time in jail, awaiting trial; between literary whydunnit and Bad Girls. There are also passages from the point of view of the star's grieving mother, who is trying to make sense of her daughter's life and death.

So why did a Long Island rich kid end up in the dock for murder? Part of the pleasure of this well-written novel is in the puzzle, and second-time novelist Lauren Sanders does a great job here. I didn't expect to believe the reason, when it came, but in fact I did. Circumstances build up to a shooting that makes perfect sense.

But it could only happen because Lillian, deprived of healthy relationships, develops an obsession with young Brooke Harrison off the telly. With wealthy, selfish, dysfunctional parents

and more interest in girls than boys, Lillian is taken under the wing of an air stewardess who lives nearby. Blair wraps her arms around Lillian in bed, strokes her hair and gives her liquor. What more could a girl want?

It's a shame that the plot demands that Blair abandon Lillian, because the relationship is a compelling one and the book flags a little without it. But then the stage is set: after a useless mum and a vanished mother-figure, why would Lillian look to real people for comfort?

Still, there are other encounters ahead, especially when self-centred wild-girl Edie joins Lillian's class at school and becomes her friend. Together they get stoned and watch video tapes of the soap opera in which Brooke's character is subjected to ever more ludicrous plot-lines. But while Edie can take it or leave it, Lillian eats, sleeps and smokes it.

If only she'd known that this obsession was leading towards the day when she'd be saying, "Ever since I told Mimi about the fat lady in my cell, she's been making me wear a plug up my butt." And it's made out of a carrot!

Sanders has both a serious eye for the rotten fame/money/escape culture of mainstream America and a playful authorial hand. We're never sure what she'll deal up next, and the switch between past and present is highly effective in keeping up the tension. The intensity of adolescent crushes on older women and TV stars is all too real; thank god it didn't land us all in Mimi's cell block.

The novel is far from didactic, but Sanders is constantly pointing up the hurdles that face young women with promise who try to make their way in the world. From wealthy Lillian, whose father owns an ad agency, to the poor Black and Latina women with whom she shares a tattoo needle in jail, or the star she winds up murdering, there is little hope of a "normal" life left for any of them.

A few days after finishing *With or Without You*, what has stayed with me is the atmosphere of the book, which is sadder than it seems at first. The main character's lively voice distracted me from her loneliness - and she seemed like a survivor. It took a long time before I realised the extent of her delusions about Brooke - basically, she thinks Brooke is with her all the time, if only in spirit - and even longer to see how dangerous she was. And this despite her being banged up on a murder charge. Somehow, I just didn't want to lose faith in Lillian. I liked her too much.

Akashic, 2005, 317 pages, £9.99

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF THE PORNOGRAPHIC IMAGINATION Joshua Sofaer on Samuel R. Delany's *Hogg*

HOGG IS explicitly and violently pornographic. Delany takes his readers to the limit of readability - but as long as you keep reading, you repeatedly face up to some of the darkest and most carefully hidden parts of your own desire. Presented in a similar format to the conquests of Walter in *My Secret Life* by Frank Harris (1890) and the narratives of de Sade, *Hogg* follows the encounters of the boy-narrator-protagonist in a catalogue of sexual and violent acts which he witnesses, or more often participates in, involving the dirt-encrusted trucker-cum-hit-man, Hogg.

I found myself varying between arousal and disgust (and occasionally disgust at my arousal), between groping my erection and plunging my hand into my crotch the way nervous children do, trying to find my shrivelled cock, which had withdrawn in horror at the narrative. Reading *Hogg* makes you viscerally complicit.

I heard him grunt. He smelled like a stopped toilet-stall, where somebody had left six months of dirty socks, in the back of a butcher shop with the refrigeration unit on the blink, on fire. The tube under his dick filled, retreated, filled again; and spilled enough spunk for three guys. "Pissin' in you now boy..." Not like Pedro's or his pop's shotglass leakage. I swallowed five times (he was still pumping into my face), and I couldn't hold no more.

Written in San Francisco in 1969 and revised over the next four years, it took Delany twenty years to find a publisher for *Hogg*, despite a backlist of popular successes as a writer of fiction, science fiction and non-fiction. Even the editor at Olympia Press, who first published *Lolita*, said that *Hogg* was the only novel he'd "ever rejected solely because of its sexual content." When it was issued by Black Ice Books and FC2 in 1995 it was published in an edition of just five-hundred. The current reprint by FC2 is the first time *Hogg* has been issued to a wider readership.

Although *Hogg* is not autobiographical, the unnamed child protagonist and narrator would appear, in part, to be Delany. The racial ambiguity of the narrator-protagonist (he slips between a black/white identification) could very easily be Delany himself, who has described elsewhere his

ability to 'pass' as white. Hogg is an autobiography of the pornographic imagination. Even where there is no 'resemblance' to be found, the extreme nature of the content brings us back to the life of the author; we inevitably ask: what kind of guy would write this stuff?

My own boredom with much of gay fiction in which the older, educated, usually white author-narrator-protagonist recounts his predilections and fantasies for a usually younger, less educated, often racially or ethnically othered working class 'boy', makes Hogg a radically refreshing read. Here it is the kid who not only offers himself up as an object of the abject desirable, but it is he who actually embodies the corruption the other characters perpetrate. The unnamed boy-narrator is always one step ahead of his 'master' Hogg, a dynamic which is made explicit only in the brilliantly conceived ending, when he makes his desire clear.

Neither the objects of desire, nor the sex acts in *Hogg* correspond to the usual body-minded aesthetic we have come to expect in gay fiction. Heterosexual sex is also fully integrated into the narrative. Delany's novel is more un-gay or anti-gay than gay fiction..

He was a big man, with the start of a gut. Yellow hair tufted between the missing buttons at the bottom of his shirt, and all up around a neck thick as a scrub pail. Watching him, I got the thought that maybe a month ago he'd been on his back under a car and hadn't bothered to wash since. His hands and forearms, under the gold fur that burned in the four o'clock sun striking up the alley, were grease-gray. His face was like sunburned brick, smeared and streaked over.

But while *Hogg* still feels incredibly fresh in the way it turns the expectations and tropes of gay fiction on their head, especially in the way it positions the locus of desire, more troubling is the depiction of the female characters. While men are subject to the same kinds of abuses as women in the book, it is men (or boys) who are empowered as the perpetrators of abuse, and it is their story that we follow. We see the male characters in their 'downtime'; they are more rounded; somehow we find ourselves identifying with them; the women are portrayed as passive victims of abuse.

Along with other sexually violent fictions (like Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* and *Try*) Delany takes you on a purgative journey. You face some of your darkest fears and desires, and are brought out the other side, somehow cleansed. What marks

Hogg out from other such fictions, is that it is narrated by a boy, and not a man. This conceit of the child-narrator has the effect of reminding us that what we are reading is a fiction, it is literature. The vocabulary is not that of an early adolescent street kid. Although Delany makes use of the vernacular, *Hogg* is clearly the work of a dexterous novelist rather than a corrupt pubescent boy. Recognition of this acts as a distancing device, a constant reminder that we are reading a story.

Unlike sex itself, *Hogg* is not more-ish. I was relieved to get to the end. But the relief was not that of dutifully completing a novel I got no pleasure from, rather it was the relief of an exhausting journey. of a challenge accepted and fulfilled.

FC2 (Fiction Collective 2), 2004, 268 pages, \$16.95

ON WANKING, TICKLING, AND BEING ADORED

Paul Kane on Greg Wharton's *Johnny Was* and *Other Tall Tales*

JOHNNY WAS and *Other Tall Tales* is a versatile collection of 24 short erotic stories. Greg Wharton says in his Preface that he is attracted to the "darker emotions" - and it shows. Those stories one might call the "shadow spots" of the book shine the brightest.

The title story sets the tone for much of what is to follow. "Johnny Was" is a compelling love story between a sadist with a penchant for extreme edge play and a young man with a death wish. In "That Grin," a man tells the story of his sexuality and its formative influences: being tickled by an uncle, and being tickled and wrestled to the ground by older boys. The protagonist doesn't complain about being abused or revel in his role as victim; instead, the demon has become the desired. Tickle torture has become the kink the man now lives for. "That Grin" also illustrates a theme that is present in a number of Wharton's other stories: the way in which sexuality and identity can arise from traumatic experiences.

"Blood Oranges and Cotton Candy" is a coming of age story. As a boy, Paul was raped by his brother's friend, Jared; yet at a moment of crisis in his life, it is Jared whom Paul seeks out:

Jared, the man who I feared the most, yet dreamed of and desired the most. He's the reason I'm so fucked up - or at least he's who I've always blamed. He's the reason I'm such a slut - or at least he's who I've always blamed. He's the man

I always look for in other men, and he's who I see when I close my eyes with the other men.

It is clear that desire, far from being a simple thing for Wharton's characters, is fraught with peril.

In "Love," a man gives a list of the ordeals and torments his beloved must undergo before he will make an admission of love. We begin with asphyxiation and end with adoration, and all the various emotions - anger and tenderness - that fall under the glyph of love are expressed. As a dissection of the constituent elements of desire, this story is an extraordinary achievement. It also offers a convincing explanation for the diminished attraction of card games in evening society.

In a collection as varied as *Johnny Was*, we naturally get many stories of a lighter hue. In "Walking Olive," a dog-walker loses a dog while wanking on a client's bed. The fun here lies in the tone of voice: very arch, very camp. There are whimsical, amusing fantasies like "Cock-Sucking in America" and exquisitely framed vignettes like "Bibles 10% Sale." The latter is a story in which love has been lost and sex is all that is left between two people. It ends with a beautiful moment of epiphany: "Under the blizzard white evening sky, I spill my bitter white love for you on the snow around my knees, and I swallow yours." "His Baby" is a tender story about two lovers, Sam and Roberto, who are forced to flee Chicago after stealing money from the mob. The story has a nice noir vibe, but reads in parts like a fragment.

Some of the more minor stories, such as "Cropped", will describe a certain kick (here, being whipped) and tell you what it is like, giving a distillation of the experience. Others are What-If stories, wishes that might plausibly be fulfilled. A favourite is "Blue", in which a man who hasn't had sex for a while looks over to the apartment opposite and sees another man wanking; he wanks as he watches, then realizes the other man can see him...

Greg Wharton's stories engage our heart and hippocampus as well as our libido. There are graphic descriptions of sexual and sometimes violent acts, yet, for all that, very little casual sex. After reading this collection, you might consider the phrase "casual sex" to be a found oxymoron, like, say, military intelligence or reality television. Sex occurs here, as it does for all of us, as part of some larger life project, whether of love, obsession or need. And even where the sex is "unusual," Wharton never lets us forget that there is always, as it were, a person appended to the appendage.

HONOUR THE MOTION Ailbhe Darcy on Stacy D'Erasmus's *A Seahorse Year*

A SEAHORSE Year does not start off promisingly. Stacey D'Erasmus embarks on her second novel like a creative writing student who has been instructed to "show, don't tell." The first few pages are a dutiful laying out of the minutiae of her characters' lives. Hal is tending a fish tank that contains "...a lionfish, a snowflake eel, three temperamental tangs, and a bamboo cat shark," which goes to show that the author knows her fish. Nan is surveying her garden, ticking off four square beds of flowers, planks of silvered wood, grass, trumpet vines, a flowering plum tree, some daisies, and a stone statue. Marina, Nan's girlfriend, is in her studio, which gives rise to a page-long list of artist's equipment and a sample from her CD collection. I'll spare you the details.

Through this dizzying plethora of stuff, we learn what we are supposed to think of these people. Christopher is the mentally disturbed teenage son - later diagnosed schizophrenic - who loves fish and has gone missing. Hal is the former local rock star, now an accountant, who once impregnated Nan with a turkey-baster. Nan is the bookshop owner who knows her long-time lover is having an affair with a much younger woman. And Tamara is Christopher's girlfriend, the PJ Harvey fan with the over-plucked eyebrows and permanently cynical expression.

D'Erasmus does her characters a disservice by introducing them to us in terms of their lives' paraphernalia. It is only when she stops showing them to the reader and lets them get on with their lives that they become real. When they are allowed to live, this little group does so with a vengeance, each relating their own version of events in a complex dance of rotating perspectives.

A Seahorse Year is rich with the private exchanges between two people that make up the dynamic of an extended family group. In bed, Marina considers the scar on Nan's right hip, and one toenail that is wavy and yellowed: familiar landmarks, she thinks to herself. "There," she tells Nan as she brings her to orgasm, "I have you. I have you, Nan." The "old cracked maroon cock" Nan pulls from the bedside drawer tells us vastly more than all the lyrical descriptions of fish tanks and gardens in the beginning. Clutched by Nan "like a rescue buoy," Marina deludes herself that Nan is oblivious of her infidelity. But Nan is obsessed: Is the stupid girl young? Rich? Do they meet at Marina's studio? At night?

Hal is similarly anxious as he embarks on a new romance: Was that kiss sexy or brotherly? Does it matter to him that I'm white? Does Capricorn get along with Aquarius?

The plot, driven by Christopher's illness, forces hands. The tentative relationships between lovers are brought into relief by the fierce certainty of parental instinct shifting into gear. Lovers suddenly find themselves faced with that moment when sexual alliance must become solid partnership, or die. Nan and Hal, meanwhile, seem more and more like a married couple. Their shared anguish draws them together in spite of themselves, shutting others out.

Through it all, Christopher's relationship with Tamara thrives outside the borders of reality. The teenagers lie on Christopher's floor holding each other's breath, plotting to run away to Fiji. Their confidence in each other never waivers.

A *Seahorse Year* is, unabashedly, a novel about love. At its heart is Tamara's expression of love as respect for another's reality: "the idea that a person is that person, just that one, and no other, and who that person is should be honored... if you honor that person you sort of step aside to let him pass to wherever he's going. You honor the motion." When Christopher claims he can breathe underwater, Tamara knows that doesn't mean he's going to stick his head in the bath:

And maybe he can breathe in water, who's to say? She isn't going to test him. That's where honor comes in: she honors his belief, the way you have to honor the belief of people in Fiji that the water spirits desire gifts, or whatever it is they believe. You just have to toss the flower into the water with an open hand.

But Christopher does step into the Pacific to breathe, and very nearly drowns.

A *Seahorse Year* is a wise and intricate account of a group of people negotiating the heartache they cause each other. They must each learn what fifteen-year-old Tamara already knows: that the key to the dance is respecting the path of the other dancers, letting the other dancers pass. The story suggests that Tamara and Christopher must learn, too, the limits that life places on that kind of love. Amidst all the adults' convolutions and compromises, it is Tamara's voice that rings clear and true. The strength of her faith leads the reader to suspect that, whatever poetic injustices may be wreaked by plot, she is right: Love must always believe in Fiji and breathing underwater, or

flounder in a sea of grown-up stuff.

Houghton Mifflin (hardback), 2004, 360 pages, around \$24

I LOVE IT ALL CRUISEY AND NELLY Gregory Woods on Frank O'Hara's *Selected Poems*

BY THE time of his death on Fire Island in 1966 – run over by a beach buggy in the middle of the night – Frank O'Hara was a familiar figure in those circles where the New York art scene and the street-level gay subcultures overlapped. Not only was he Associate Curator at the Museum of Modern Art, but he had established himself as an energetic presence on the vibrant poetry circuit of the day. Fully immersed in the business of working out how to live and write in a new era as an openly gay man, he wrote about his own milieu in his own city: New York, Sodom-on-Hudson ("Commercial Variations"), where the very leaves fall from the trees "like angels who've been discharged for sodomy" ("Second Avenue").

Hardly anywhere else interested him. In "Meditations in an Emergency" he distances himself from what was expected of a certain type of gay poet: "I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life, nor with nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures. No. One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes – I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life". His work is so firmly based in one place that he could be accused of parochialism, were it not for the fact that New York is such a special case as a worldwide exemplar of the modern urban experience. In any case, his poetry is often very European in its influences: Rimbaud, for a start, as well as the full spectrum of European modernist painters.

O'Hara's roommate and sometime lover Joe LeSueur later said of him: "there were times when I thought he was in love with at least half of his friends, for it was possible for him to get so emotionally involved that it wasn't unusual for him to end up in bed with one of them and then, with no apparent difficulty, to go right back to being friends again afterward... He didn't make distinctions, he mixed everything up: life and art, friends and lovers – what was the difference between

them?" What O'Hara particularly valued was a queerness that overlapped with everything else: work and leisure, high art and low life, sadness and hilarity, sex and friendship, masculinity and femininity, straightness and bentness.

Because he loathed the idea that he should ever have to close himself off from any aspect of life, he refused to mix in closed gay circles and snobby elites. Joe Le Sueur later wrote: "if he was going to be adamantly opposed to the gay ghetto principle... he must have felt it necessary, as a point of pride and as a moral obligation, to hammer home to straight people the clear, unmistakable message that he was an uncontrite, arrogant queer who was not about to sing *miserere* or fall on his knees to anyone." Or if he were to fall to his knees, he would do so only for an angelic physique.

O'Hara is that miraculous creature, a poet who is actually enjoying his life. The tone of his work is so optimistic that even when he says "All I want is boundless love" ("Meditations in an Emergency") it is as if he is not asking for much. His mood is infectious. When he ends one of his poems of street observations with the challenging question to the reader, "why are you reading this poem anyway?" ("Petit Poème en Prose") the implication is that we might be better occupied walking the streets, creating the encounters out of which to make poems of our own. Poetry must be based not in detached contemplation, but in active involvement and celebration: "What is the poet for, if not to scream / himself into a hernia of admiration for / paradoxical integuments" ("Ashes on Saturday Afternoon"). His language is often subculturally specific—"it's the night like I love it all cruisy and nelly" ("Easter") - as if he expects everyone, philiac and phobic alike, to take part in the gayness of his gaiety and the nelliness of his tears.

Included in this volume is O'Hara's light-hearted but serious manifesto of what he called "Personism", whereby the poem speaks "between two persons instead of two pages." Only half-joking when he says this method will prove "the death of literature as we know it," he advocates a poetry that speaks directly to the reader as an individual rather than loftily down to a crowd. He acknowledges - as so many poets do not, now as then - that there is more to life than verse, and more to verse than versification. (His own preferred art forms were painting and cinema. As he put it, "only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies.") While his poems can - and often strive to - seem casual, they also display a phenomenal mastery of

open forms. Of technique, he has this to say: "As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There's nothing metaphysical about it."

Carcanet Press, 2005 (reissue), 233 pages, £9.95

Chroma: Biographies

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Akkas Al-Ali was born in 1979. He is a writer, playwright and actor living in London. His plays have been showcased around London and the South-East. He writes for MOC, a magazine aimed at gay men of colour. His weblog, A Hand Full of Stars, is at www.gr8gatsby.blogspot.com

Jake Arnott is the author of three novels. His first novel, *The Long Firm*, was filmed for BBC Television. *He Kills Coppers* was published in 2001, and *Truecrime* in 2003.

Adam Bala was born in London and has lived most of his life in the city. He has worked in the civil service, publishing and the NHS.

Cabello/Carceller are the collaborative artists Helena Cabello and Ana Carceller. They are based in Madrid.

Bec Chalkley is a freelance writer, photographer and advocate. Her work has been published in *Diva* and *Plan B* magazines. Bec was Live Music Editor for RealBrighton.com website, which she continues to contribute to. Bec lives in Brighton. Contact: bec.chalkley@btinternet.com.

Wei Kiat Chen was born in Singapore and currently lives in London. He studied Literature at The University of York before undertaking a Masters in Creative Writing at The University of Sydney, Australia. He has won a number of top prizes in writing competitions and was invited to participate in RANT, a literary reading that was part of the Cultural Festival of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2003.

Phyllis Christopher recently released the DVD *Sextrospective: A Decade with San Francisco's Sexiest Lesbians*, her collection of photographs documenting the lesbian sexual revolution of the 1990s. Her photographs appear in the books *Nothing But The Girl – The Blatant Lesbian Image*, and *I Am My Lover – Women Pleasure Themselves*, amongst others. Her work can be viewed online at thesexystuff.com and phyllischristopher.com

Ailbhe Darcy has a degree in English and French from University College Dublin, where she helped to run the LGB Society. She is completing an MA in Publishing at London College of Communication and working to develop Chroma's international reach. She has written for a broad range of magazines and journals.

S Dass started writing 6 months ago. She is working on a film short and a book of short stories. She lives in the UK. The poem 'falter' is dedicated to Van Nair.

Minke Douwes was born in 1962. Her sizable debut novel, *Strict*, was published in Holland in 2003 and was an immediate success. The book was reprinted four times within a year. Minke Douwes is a psychiatrist.

Paul Gardiner moved to London about 5 years ago. He's produced illustrations for a range of clients and is currently working to get more of a foothold in the editorial market. Paul also works as a graphic designer and has an interest in Photography and the Moving Image. He lives in Stoke Newington with his long suffering boyfriend.

Richard Goodson is currently writing a collection of poems about the male nude for a PhD in Creative Writing. For the past seven years he has taught English to asylum-seekers in an inner-city college in Nottingham. He performs as part of a group called DIY Poets.

Rosemary Harris was commissioned for Apples & Snakes' "Verbaleyes" (2004) and for 2005's "Broken Words" national tour. She has performed at Glastonbury, BAC, Soho Writers' Festival and on Radio 3. Her work appears in *Poetry London* and *Orbis*. In 2004, Rosemary won first prize in Middlesex University International Poetry Competition.

Kobi Israel began his exploration of photography in 1994 when he was a flight attendant. In 1996, he studied cinematography at the New York Film Academy, and returned to Tel-Aviv to complete a degree at Camera Obscura, the school of visual arts in Tel-Aviv. Kobi settled in London in 2002. He was a finalist in the "Schweppes Photographic Portrait Prize 2003" at the National Portrait Gallery in London. His most recent book is *Intimate Strangers*. See more at kobi-israel.com.

Ashley Jones is a part time lecturer of photography at Oaklands College. She graduated from the University of Derby in 1997 with a degree in photographic studies, after which, she lived in the States where amongst other thing she completed a three-month internship at Light Works Photography Lab. Now she lives and works in London.

Paul Kane is a graduate of the University of Birmingham (MSc. Cognitive Science) who now lives and works in Manchester. Work involves web design, teaching and writing; life and leisure involves various ludic and celivagous activities.

Let Me Feel Your Finger First (LMFYFF) is a London-based comic art collective. Published works include a gasp, a glitch and a halting gait (1998), 'Yep! Yep! Yep!' (1999) and 'Greenhorn' (2000). The animated short, "Homo Zombies" has been screened at shows and festivals around the world, and released on the DVD compilation *Bloody Gays* by Films de l'ange in 2005. The Uncle Hans-Peter Party will take place at a London venue in early 2006. See more at letmeefeelyourfingerfirst.com

Peter McGrath, writer, designer, sometime activist, aspiring aerilist and prospective adoptive parent, grew up poor with pretensions in Scotland, disdainful of the creeping influence of American English and culture. The "Long Losing" comes from recent Christmases spent in Seattle. He is interested in Jason Sellards' hot little butt.

Emily Moreton is a 23-year old graduate of the University of Warwick, with a degree in Education Studies. She has worked as a receptionist, an English teacher, a waitress and a fake patient for medical school exams, and is currently a course secretary. She writes for RESPECT Refugee Charity's e-zine.

Ruth O'Callaghan's publications include *The London Magazine*, *Ambit*, *Magma*, and *Poetry Salzburg Review* and anthologies *Not For The Academy* and *Vision and Statement for the Prosecution*. She has read her work at Poetry Cafe, Torriano, Salisbury House and in Amsterdam, as well as at Richmond's Book Now Literary Festival.

JP Owen was born in Merseyside in 1972. She has three degrees, two involving English Literature. She has been an advice worker, a university librarian, and more recently a Web site manager. She lives in South East London with two cats and a girlfriend.

Heena Patel lives and works in Manchester. In her spare time she helps to put on queer events and is in a group of undead gender-bending dancers called Dragula. See www.kaffequeeria.org.uk

Selina Rodrigues has had poetry published in the *Redbeck Anthology of British South Asian Poetry* and *Masala*, an anthology of Asian verse for children published by Macmillan, and various magazines.

Helen Sandler is the director of the York Lesbian Arts Festival (ylaf.org.uk) and is books editor of *Diva* magazine. She has written two novels, *Big Deal* and *The Touch Typist*, and edited three short story anthologies for Diva Books, two of which won Lambda Literary awards. Two of her poems are in *Suspect Thoughts* #15. More at helensandler.co.uk

Parminder Sekhon is a photographer and artistic director of Mehtab Theatre Company. Her last show: *The Maharajah's Daughters* (2003) ran to great acclaim at Watermans. She also works in health promotion in the South Asian Lesbian and Gay communities, and promotes visibility of these communities through photography.

Joshua Sofaer is a live artist, writer and Research Fellow at ResCen, the Centre for Research into Creation in the Performing Arts at Middlesex University. Recent projects include *Tate Scavengers*, a scavenger hunt and exhibition in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern this summer. The website joshuasofaer.com archives recent works.

Raffaele Teo, graphic designer, illustrator and artist, has exhibited throughout Europe. After having taken what he called 'a sabbatical decade', he is currently working on his next project, *Parthenopee*.

Fabian Thomas is an actor, director, poet, writer, singer, communications consultant, Hospitality/Customer Service Trainer and HIV/AIDS Educator and Project Manager. His writing has been previously published in *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices (Other Countries)*, *Bad Boys, Gents and Barbarians* and *Fighting Words*.

Laura Vroomen was born in the Netherlands and now lives in London. After completing a doctorate on women and popular music, she retrained as a translator. She has worked as a full-time translator since, specialising in literary and financial translation.

Andrew Warburton is a 24-year-old writer currently applying for English-teaching jobs in Japan. His poem "The Waiter" appeared in *Chroma Issue 2* and his erotic short story "Hustler" will feature in a forthcoming anthology. He is working on his first novel. Contact him at andrewwarburton@hotmail.com

Gregory Woods is Professor of Gay and Lesbian Studies at Nottingham Trent University. His books include *Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-eroticism and Modern Poetry* (1987) and *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (1998), both from Yale University Press. His latest poetry collection is *The District Commissioner's Dreams* (Carcanet, 2002).

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Five years of breakdown separate pianist Theo Mangrove's last recital in Europe from his planned comeback in Aigues-Mortes. Meanwhile, Theo's wife will have nothing to do with him so he finds comfort with male hustlers, random strangers and naked piano students - all of which contribute to his growing dissolution. Overcome with the belief that Moira Orfei, queen of the 60s' Italian circus, must perform with him, Theo begins to write to her and incorporates her replies into his musical notes. Peopled by piano-playing relatives, prostitutes, muses and manipulators; poet and cultural critic Wayne Koestenbaum's first novel shines a hot light on the treacherous crossroads of sex, death, family and popular culture.

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Let Me Feel Your Finger First
Auf Wiedersehen

Nothing got resolved that day. Alpa was determined to find a Hindu gay guy and marry him for the sake of convenience. The only one she knew was a hideous little queen who lived in my halls at university in Manchester. At 18, he was younger than my sister by four years. A pathological liar ("I used to be a podium dancer at Heaven") and horny as hell. He was hated by all the new LGB recruits. The only thing in his favour was that he was from a Gujarati family. From Wembley, no less.

(from Heena Patel's "My Staying-in Story")